THE KIDNAPPED BOY

by

T. J. WALTER

"To the boys of Peake House

Lawrence College"

CHAPTER I

MAHMUD AND THE CRYING BOY.

Mahmud, hot and bothered by the journey from Lahore, stepped out of 'Pindi station into the midday heat of the sun. He counted the rupees which he had tucked inside his shalwar and decided against a proper meal. Some tikkas and a "coke" would do! Better to save his money for his holiday in Murree.

Mahmud was tall and well built for his fifteen years and now moved with lithe, athletic movements away from the station. He only carried a small bag as his uncle in Murree would provide bedding enough. He wandered down from the station towards the Raja Bazaar. In the heat of day, the streets were comparatively empty and he found it easy to make his way.

Suddenly he was startled by a cry behind him, "Look out!"

He turned quickly and was just in time to see a small child stepping off the side of the road, right under the wheels of an oncoming bus.

Mahmud dropped his case and, with the speed of lightning, ran three steps, dived and knocked the child to one side. There was a screeching of brakes and the scream of a woman but, thanks to Mahmud's alertness, the child was safe.

Mahmud picked himself and the child up. His knees and elbows were tingling and, when he looked down, he saw a red patch of blood on his shalwar where he had grazed his knee.

"Thank you! Oh, thank you!" cried the child's mother rushing up. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right, thank you," said Mahmud who really felt rather shaken. "But the roads are too busy for you to allow your baby to wander alone."

The woman looked a little ashamed at this and said, "You're right but sometimes it's very difficult." She picked her child up, hugged him to her, thanked Mahmud again and went on her way, chiding the child for running off.

Mahmud picked up his case and walked off as quickly as he could to get away from the crowd of people who had gathered and were

pointing him out to one another. He stopped at a stall to buy some "tikkas" and his mouth began to water as he watched the rings of meat being turned on their spit over the glowing charcoal. The man at the stall, satisfied they were just right, scraped them off and put them into a piece of paper. For a while they haggled over the price and the stallholder, cheerfully abusing Mahmud, brought it down a couple of annas. Mahmud, laughing, strode off with his prize.

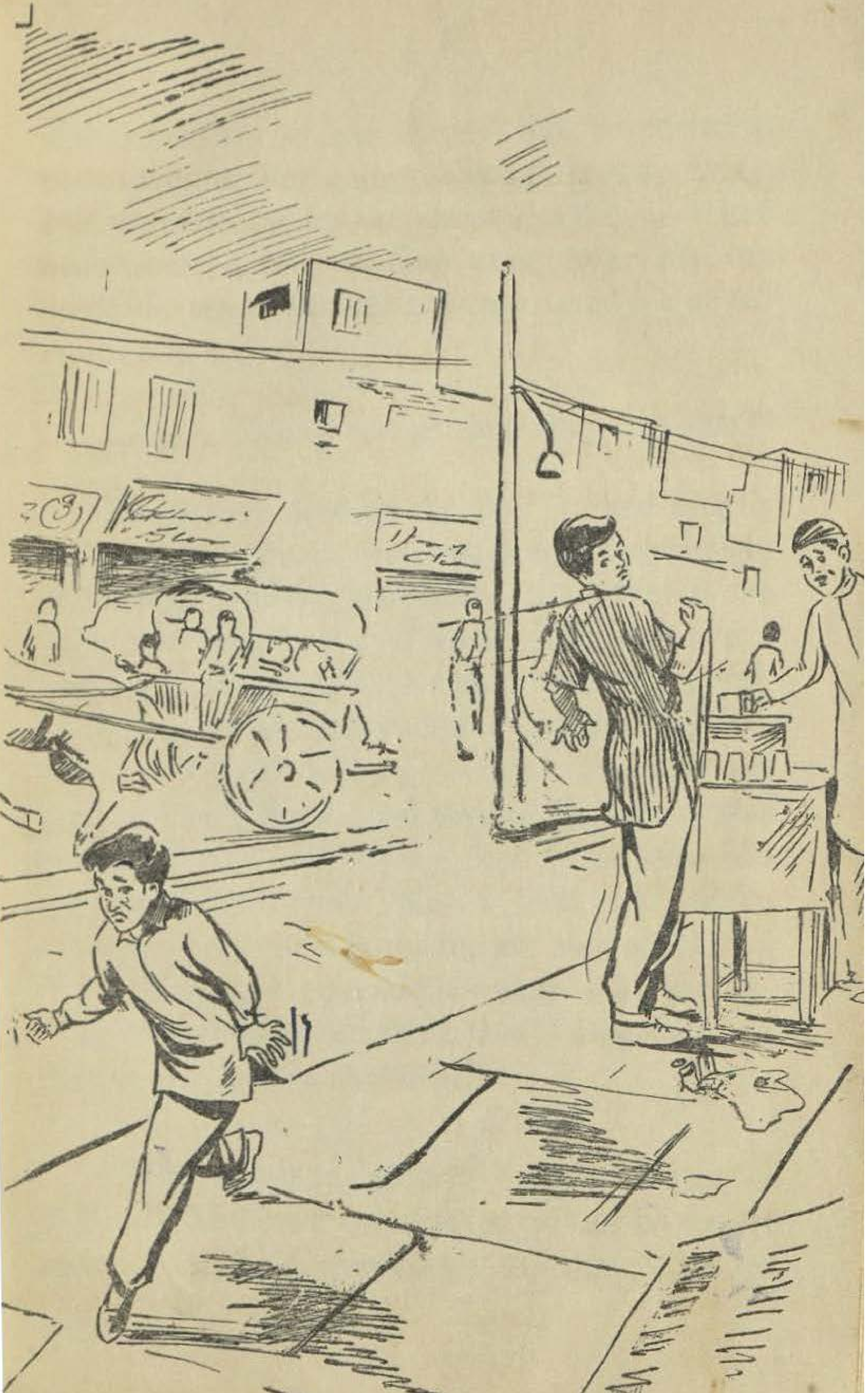
He soon found someone selling sherbet and sat down at the side of the road under the shade of the man's cart to eat his meal. He felt in no hurry and lingered over the tasty meat, watching the men in a shop opposite sucking intently on their hookahs while they argued with one another. Further down the road a tonga driver and the driver of a bullock cart were engaged in a heated argument but it was too hot to be too fierce and they soon went their rickety ways, cursing to themselves. Mahmud smiled to himself. He always loved the activity in the bazaars.

Crash! Mahmud was jerked out of his reverie to see his sherbet glass lying shattered on the road. It had been kicked over by a small boy

of about seven years of age who was now racing off as fast as his small legs could carry him. Mahmud jumped to his feet and started to run after the culprit but suddenly felt a strong hand clamp down on his shoulder and push him roughly to one side so that he lost his balance and crashed down against a pile of wooden crates outside a shop. The crates, for a moment, swung over his head and then came toppling down. With a violent twist of his body, Mahmud managed to roll out of the way. Meanwhile the street was in a furore. The sherbet seller had left his stall and rushed after the boy and the man who had so violently pushed Mahmud to one side, and now they had all caught up with one another and their angrily shouting group was surrounded by an excited crowd, eager to see the argument.

Mahmud picked himself up, wondering how many more bruises that day was to bring, and hurried down to the crowd. He pushed his way through and saw that the small boy was held in a vice-like grip by a tall and very dark man. The boy had an expression of complete terror in his eyes and was mumbling indistinctly and flinching away as if he was expecting a blow.

"Come along," said the man, "and I'll deal



with you when we get home," and he started to turn as if he was going to drag the boy away. He was stopped by the sherbet seller who had been snorting and puffing away after his run down the street but had now recovered his power of speech.

"Hey! You're not getting away like that!"

The man, holding the boy, turned angrily and Mahmud for the first time caught a clear sight of his face, which immediately struck him as the most evil face he'd ever seen. The man had a low forehead over which his hair, matted by sweat, hung in an untidy mop and his eyes glared furiously from beneath bushy eyebrows. His nose was bent as if he'd been in a fight and his mouth now twisted into a challenging leer. But what distinguished him most was a livid scar which ran in a ragged curve down the left side of his face, from the top of his ear to the corner of his mouth. "And what makes you think that?" he growled to the sherbet seller's challenge.

"What about my glass?" whined the sherbet seller and Mahmud was relieved to hear he wasn't going to be held responsible for that. "Some-

body's got to pay for that and it was that lad of yours who broke it."

"This lad of mine?" started Scarface and then checked himself. "Oh yes! My nephew, here. The clumsy little rascal," and he shook the boy so that he started to cry and cringe even more.

"Well, what about paying for the glass? It will be one rupee."

"One rupee?" Scarface looked threateningly at the sherbet seller and turned to go away again.

But now some of the crowd began to press against him and there were murmurs of "Come on, pay up," so that Scarface hesitated a moment, plunged his hand into his shirt and threw eight annas down on the ground.

"That's as much as you 'll get," he said and turned and dragged away the boy through the crowd.

The sherbet seller cursed his luck but picked up his money and hastened back to his stall to chase off some urchins who were taking advant-

age of his absence to make off with some of his ice. He was clearly in a temper and Mahmud was careful to pick up his case, which he'd left behind the stall, without being seen. He felt he'd had enough knocks for one afternoon.

CHAPTER II

THE ROAD TO MURREE.

Mahmud settled down into his seat on the bus and prepared himself for the jolting ride up the Murree Road. He still felt sore from all his bumps of the early afternoon but now, as he began to think of the journey ahead, he forgot the incidents in the Bazaar. He'd made this journey once before, and he remembered with excitement the twisting, turning road which winds its way up, leaving the plains and the shimmering Rawal Lake, into the cool, green pine forests.

The bus, as usual, was packed with people and Mahmud found himself wedged down against the window by a gigantic man who clutched to himself a huge basket of fruit. As the bus jerked out of the bus station, Mahmud found that this burden was increasingly pressed on him. The man moved the basket over even more in order to reach a small tin which turned out to contain his snuff. Mahmud grimaced as the man put the snuff in his mouth and the man laughed. "Do you want some?" he asked.

Mahmud shuddered. "No, thank you."

"Well have a peach, then," the man said and plunged a monstrous hand into the basket and pulled out a luscious peach.

Mahmud accepted it gratefully and looked out of the window as they hooted their way out of the city and through the site of Islamabad and at last began their stiff climb towards the Galis. The man with the basket was eager for conversation.

"Where are you from, then?"

"Lahore."

"And you're going to Murree, I suppose."

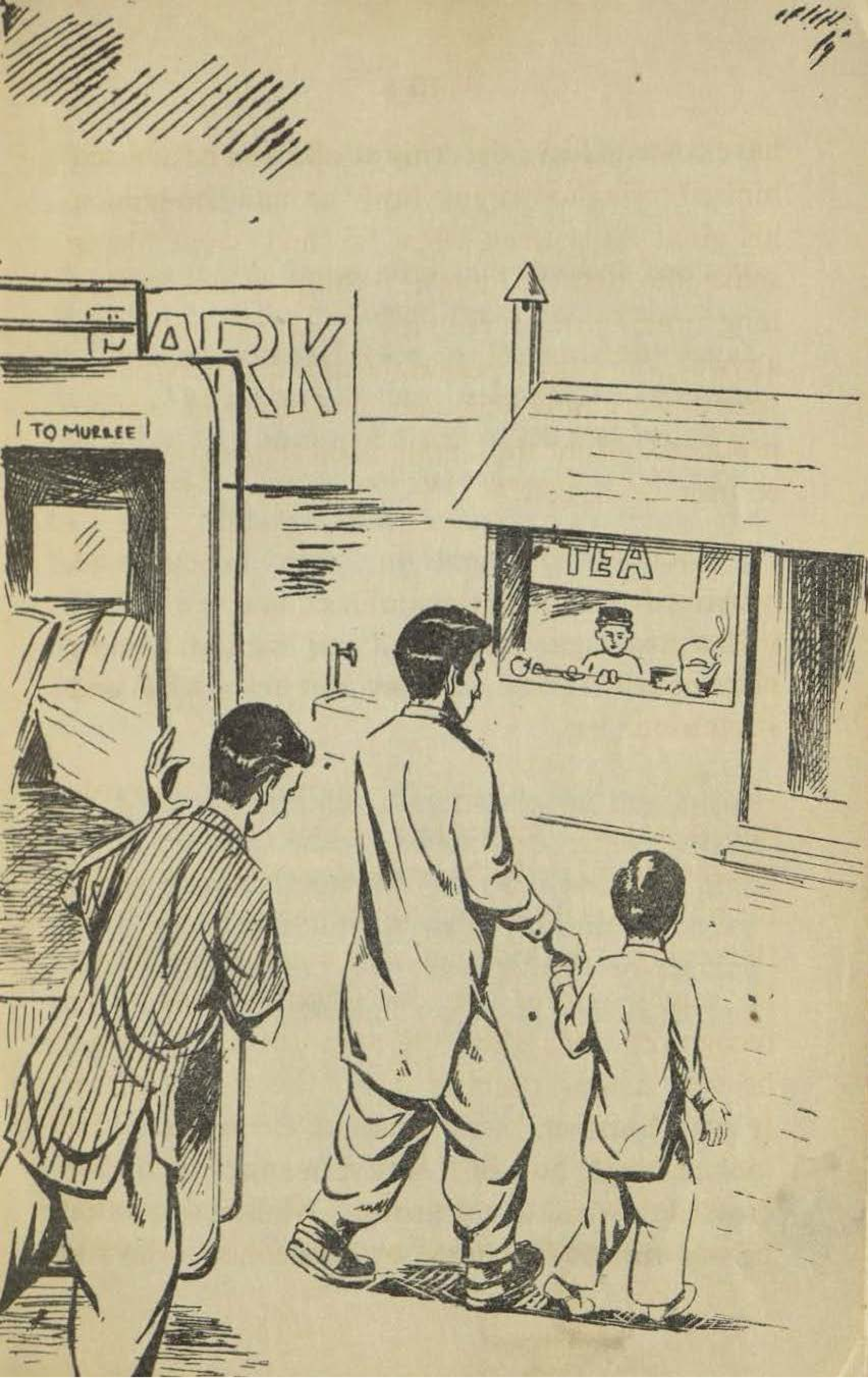
"Yes, we're on holiday from school and I'm going to stay with my uncle. He's a major in the army and lives up there."

"Oh! A soldiering family are you? That reminds me...." and then Mahmud was treated to long stories about the battles the man with the basket had fought in during the Second World War, when he claimed he fought in Burma. He told such heroic stories of himself that Mahmud was at a loss to understand how such a hero could

have come to leave the army at all, and he amused himself trying to imagine how the man had hidden his great fat paunch when he 'had crept like a snake through the jungle'. Still, it had been a long time ago and perhaps it was possible and, anyway, the stories passed the time and were punctuated every now and then by a peach or mango produced from the unplumbed depths of that enormous basket !

Suddenly the bus, by now hissing and heaving from its long climb, ground to a halt with a great sigh. "Charra Pani," said Mahmud's neighbour. "We can get out here for a while and stretch our legs."

There was a general movement towards the door of passengers eager for a little relaxation and perhaps a cup of tea while the radiator of the bus was being cooled with water from the spring. As Mahmud was about to get down, he caught sight of someone whom he thought he recognized and, when the man turned his head, he saw a scar running down the man's cheek. It was Scarface ! The man in the bazaar. He looked about him in a furtive manner and then crossed the road to a tea shop. Mahmud saw that he was still accompanied by his nephew, who still


ARK
TO MURREE
TEA

looked very frightened, although he was holding his uncle's hand.

Something about the pair looked odd to Mahmud and he followed them across the road to the shop and sat down by the road to watch them. The man with the basket came too and offered to buy Mahmud a cup of tea and began to fuss about the amount of sugar that was being put in. But Mahmud was scarcely listening, for he was too busy watching the odd pair. Then he saw what it was that made them look so odd. Scarface was not just holding his nephew's hand. Their wrists were tied together by a short piece of rope!

Mahmud was just about to point this out to his companion, when suddenly Scarface jerked the boy away and hurried him off beyond the mud houses and hid behind a wall. Mahmud looked round quickly and saw two policemen coming along the road. So that was what had frightened Scarface!

Mahmud ran towards them, shouting "Hey! policemen! Wait a minute!" but at that moment they stepped into a waiting car and they did not hear his cry. The car drove off up the road.

Just then the engine of the Murree bus started. Mahmud ran back to the man with the basket. "Look, please, can you help me?" he cried breathlessly.

"What do you want?" said the man in surprise.

"I can't explain now, but please take my case up to Murree. I'll come up later. I have something I must do."

"All right," said the man, who was now hurrying across to the bus which was starting to draw away, "you'll find me in the Lower Mall. My name's Mazhar!"

With an enormous last effort Mazhar squeezed himself aboard the bus which chugged off up the hill.

For a moment Mahmud was at a loss what to do. It had all happened so quickly that he had no plan and for a moment just stood in the middle of the road. Then conscious that people were beginning to look at him, he walked in the direction of the house behind which Scarface was hiding. He did not stop, but looked round casually to make sure the pair were still there and then walked on as if unconcerned. Just round the

corner he clambered up a rock and hid behind a tree where he could have a good view of Scarface without being seen.

Scarface was talking quietly but in a menacing manner to the small boy who once again was in tears. After a while the man started to walk up the road, half dragging the boy with him. As two men passed walking down the hill, Scarface suddenly spoke to the boy:

"You can stop that crying. You've made us miss our bus and now we'll have to walk. It's no use complaining."

The two men laughed in sympathy and carried on their way. Once Scarface and the boy were past him, Mahmud began to follow them, keeping off the road, clambering along the rocks and dodging behind the trees. He was enjoying himself now; it was almost like a game and he jumped lightly from stone to stone. But he had only to look at the boy's pale, terror-stricken face, to remember this was no game but something real and earnest. Mahmud wished he could signal to the boy that he was trying to help but, although he had no real plan of what he was going to do, he knew it was no use giving himself away yet. He must wait for his opportunity.

The climb was steep and, although it was much cooler at this height and the worst of the afternoon was past, Mahmud began to feel tired and hot and he was relieved when Scarface and the boy sat down on a rock to rest. He searched around and found a stream and eagerly drank and bathed his face. His legs ached, his knees were sore from the grazes he'd received in 'Pindi and, for a few minutes, he slipped off his chappals and bathed his feet in the cooling stream.

But the respite did not last long. Scarface was clearly in a hurry and was becoming more and more bad tempered. Every now and then he would lash out a blow at the boy whom he now had, more or less, to carry. The little boy had stopped crying and merely whimpered.

After what seemed an eternity, Scarface turned off the road and started to clamber, half dragging half carrying the child, up a rough and twisting path which led past the ruins of the once famous Murree Brewery. Mahmud had walked on this path before and remembered that it led up, through the grounds of a large and famous College, along an old pack horse trail to Murree. Here was hope. There were bound to be people about in the College and he would be able to ask for help.

He felt more cheerful now, inspired as it were by this hope, and his legs did not seem so tired.

Climbing steeply they came up past the playing fields of the College which lay brown and empty. As they started to make their way up towards the fine School Buildings, Mahmud, who was still keeping a safe hundred yards behind, heard a bell rung and the happy chatter of boys' voices. For a moment Scarface stopped and pulled the child out of sight behind a tree and then started off again. Mahmud looked up and in the fading light saw all the College boys walking off together away from him. He turned round and saw the sun dipping down in a wonderful display of red and gold behind the hills. And as the sun sank, so did Mahmud's hope. It was sunset, the boys were off to their Mahgrib prayers. The college would be deserted. The boys would be at their devotions in the Mosque.

CHAPTER III

TRAPPED !

As Mahmud scrambled up the rocks at the side of the pack horse trail, he felt he'd never been more tired in his life. The disappointment of meeting no one in the College had knocked the spirit out of him. He had thought for a moment of running after the boys to the Mosque but he could not have interrupted their prayers and, by the time they had finished, it would have been too late. And so he had continued his wearisome pursuit.

Now it was more difficult as the path climbed in a zig-zag above his head and sometimes when Scarface had walked a hundred yards he was only twenty feet above his starting place and then, in order to keep out of sight, Mahmud had to stay much further behind. His back ached and the muscles in his legs knotted as he crouched hiding and then climbed, stooping to conceal himself behind rock or shrub. Once he lost his footing and felt a moment of wild panic as he slipped

helter-skelter downwards, scraping his hands and knees as he vainly tried to cling to the loose stone which poured down under his weight. He ended with a bump against a tree and lay there shaken and panting for a few minutes, terrified in case Scarface should have turned back. But now it was nearly dark and, even if Scarface had looked, he could scarcely have made him out in the shadows. In any case he heard the steady crunch of the stones under Scarface's shoes as he went relentlessly on his way.

Mahmud followed through the shadowy darkness, able at last to walk on the path. He was now walking like an automaton, almost forgetting his purpose and letting his mind wander as he listened to the shrill song of the crickets. He remembered his uncle and wondered whether he would be worried or annoyed because he was late. He thought of the man on the bus, Mazhar, and hoped he could trust him. He could imagine his uncle rebuking him.

"Fancy giving your belongings to a complete stranger! How stupidly you have behaved!"

But the man had been so friendly and so generous. Surely....

Mahmud's thoughts were abruptly brought to an end. A strong hand came out of the darkness and grabbed his throat! With a sudden jerk Mahmud was thrown on his back and he peered up through the dim light to make out his assailant. He was pressed firmly to the ground by a weight which his tired body could not begin to combat and there, only a couple of inches from his face, so that it assumed the proportions of a nightmare, breathed a face he would recognize anywhere—Scarface!

"Why are you following me?" growled that mouth, which opened to show a row of rotting teeth and whose fetid breath made Mahmud feel faint. "Why are you following me, I say?"

For a moment Mahmud was scarcely able to realize what had happened. His mind was swimming and then, at last, it cleared. Scarface must have seen or heard him following and then lain in wait.

"What...What do you mean?" he stammered.

"You know what I mean, you young devil," said Scarface banging the boy's head back on the ground. "You know what I mean. Why were you following me?"

"Following you? I don't know what you mean. I was just walking up to Murree."

"Oh! You were. And what were you going to do in Murree?" sneered Scarface.

"I'm going to see my uncle. He's a major in the army, stationed at Murree. You'd better be careful how you treat me. Don't think they won't track you down, if you harm me." Mahmud put his trust in the hope that Scarface was at bottom a coward and he was right.

"Oh, a major? Well...but I'm sure you are following me." Mahmud was gaining confidence now and found that when he tried to sit up, Scarface did not resist him. When he looked around, he could see the small boy whimpering in the shadow of a rock. "Why should I be following you?" he said, "Have you done something wrong?"

Scarface looked startled and at a loss what to say. Mahmud sensed the tables had been turned. "Who is that little boy?" he demanded pointing towards the rock. "Why is he crying like that?"

Scarface was clearly embarrassed. "Oh,

that's my nephew," he stammered. "He's afraid in the dark." Suddenly an idea struck him. "It was he who was frightened when you came up behind us."

For a moment they both stood in silence, Scarface in embarrassment and Mahmud deciding that it would be unwise to make any further move.

"Well, I must be going on. The lad'll want to get to bed. I hope you'll forget about what's happened."

Mahmud saw a chance for revenge. "Yes, I suppose so," he said doubtfully, "but that boy looks really tired to me. I think you ought to carry him."

Scarface scowled, hesitated and then picked up the child and started the last miles' climb up to Murree. Mahmud walked beside them in silence for a time and then saw that the small boy was gazing at him as if some slight gleam of hope glimmered in his eyes.

"What's your name?" asked Mahmud.

"Munir," said the little boy and started to cry again.

Scarface shifted the child to his other shoulder, cursing quietly to himself and the next time Mahmud tried to speak to the child, he found that he had at last fallen off to sleep.

At last they reached Murree and as they approached the Mall, the sight of the brightly lit shops and the crowds of holiday-makers out strolling made Mahmud feel much more cheerful. He thought for a while, wondering what he should do. Should he shout out? But what? "Stop this man!" But wouldn't it seem odd if he did that since the man was walking with him. Or "This man is a childlifter!" But would he be believed? The child, exhausted, was now fast asleep and his face had relaxed into that peaceful, innocent look which fills the faces of sleeping children even when they are worried.

He decided to stop and speak to a group of men he saw standing at the corner of the Lower Mall. If he could persuade them quickly and quietly, then all would be well. He saw three men standing there, chatting together, looking suddenly full of security and calm, as they idly swung their walking sticks and laughed at one another's jokes. He allowed Scarface to move away in the crowd.

"Excuse me. Please...."

"Oh! Go away," said one man and turned back to his friends.

"But,...." started Mahmud.

"Look, go away! There's too much begging by ablebodied boys. You should be ashamed of yourself. Go away!"

Mahmud turned in desperation and saw, to his horror, that Scarface had disappeared. Had he followed him for nothing? His heart sank.

He rushed off and searched frantically through the crowd. The happy, carefree chatter of the strolling holiday-makers, which a moment ago seemed to offer hope and safety, all at once had become hostile and seemed to mock him. He felt desperate. Could no one help him? Then he remembered Mazhar. Perhaps Mazhar would know what to do.

He hurried down into the Lower Mall. Here again all was activity but of a different mood from that in the Mall above. Here people were buying things because they needed them and not because the whim took them. Here were villagers

enjoying the evening air, but doing their shopping too. He went over to a man selling 'pan'.

"Excuse me," he said.

The man looked up. "Do you want pan?"

"No, can you tell me where I can find Mazhar?"

The man looked disappointed but pointed to a cloth shop a few yards down.

"Thank you," said Mahmud and hurried off. The shop, its many coloured cloths bright in the electric light, offered a booming welcome and there, just inside the door, stood the large comfortable figure of Mahmud's friend. Mahmud rushed in. "Mazhar! Mazhar!" he cried and to his own amazement threw himself into the fat man's arms. "Mazhar," he said and then looked up.

"Come in, my friend," said Mazhar and as Mahmud stepped past him into the shop, he suddenly stopped. There, standing in the far corner, were Scarface and the little boy.

CHAPTER IV

IMPRISONED.

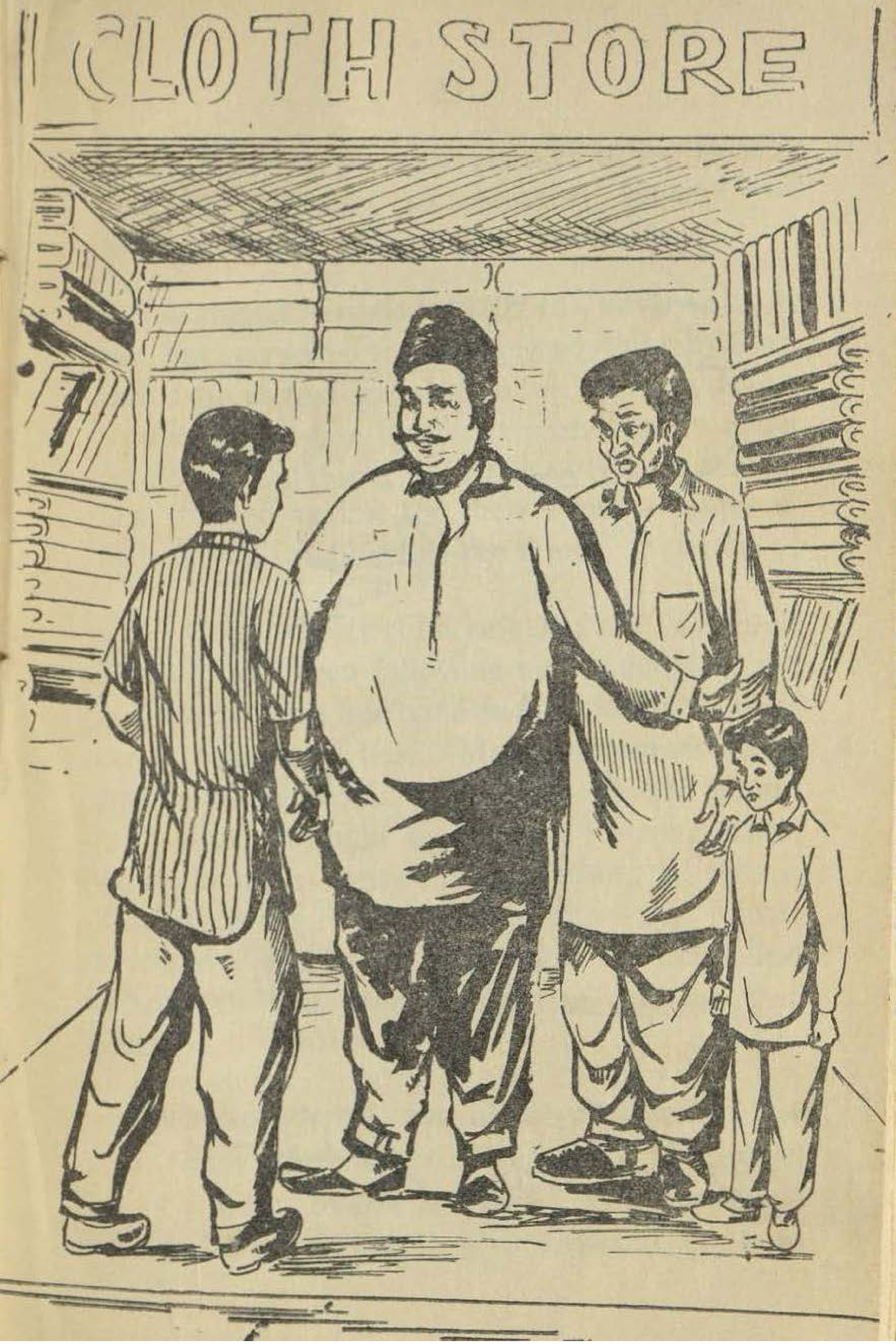
For a moment Mahmud did not know what to think. He'd come to Mazhar so full of hope and so sure of help that for a while he could not accept the awful truth of the situation. His aching body and almost desperate mind were crying out for relief. Suddenly to be so cruelly disappointed was more than he could bear.

"Who is this boy?" Mahmud's trance was broken by the harsh voice of Scarface. "Do you know him?"

Mazhar looked at Scarface in surprise. "Know him? Of course, we met on the bus up from 'Pindi. So what?"

"You mean this boy was on the same bus as we were? Where did he get off?"

"What do you mean, my dear Munawar?" asked Mazhar. "You seem very excited. You'll be upsetting my young friend. He got off at


CLOTH STORE

S. Ahsan.

A. A. S. Ahsan.

Charra Pani and now he's come to collect his case which he entrusted to my care. Haven't you Mahmud?" he said turning to the boy.

Mahmud hesitated a moment, unsure what to say, but was saved from saying anything by Scarface, who at that moment strode furiously across to him, seized him by his kameez high up under the throat, and thrust him violently back so that his head banged against the shelves and a couple of rolls of cloth tumbled to the floor.

" Come to collect his case, has he? You fool! This boy has been following me!" and with that, he drew back his free hand and cracked it savagely across Mahmud's face. Mahmud's senses reeled and he felt he would have collapsed, had he not been pinned upright by Scarface's strong hand, whose knuckles seemed to be bruising his throat. "The devil has followed me all the way," roared his captor, "and he tricked me too. It was because of him that I've sweated up here carrying that brat!"

Scarface turned away and, with a twist of his arm, threw Mahmud to the ground. Mahmud lay in a heap, unable to think. For a moment he lay there wanting to give way and cry but,

somehow, he instinctively felt that, if he cried, he'd be giving Scarface a victory. Then he heard Mazhar.

"You must have been careless in some way, you idiot." He was speaking to Scarface. "I told you to persuade the kid you were giving him a treat until we could get him away from here. Now you've got us in a mess. This brat", and he nodded towards Mahmud, "is expected here. His uncle is waiting for him and his uncle is a major. He won't let matters rest; they'll look for him. You're a fool!"

Scarface stood silent. He was taken aback by these rebukes from Mazhar who was clearly his boss or certainly his superior.

"Well, push both of them into the back there, we'll decide what to do," went on Mazhar. "We 're lucky not to have anyone rushing in so far with all the noise you've been making."

Scarface pulled Mahmud roughly to his feet and seized hold of little Munir with his other hand and bundled them through a door at the back of the shop into a dark room. The door slammed shut behind them.

For a while neither of them said anything.

Mahmud was exhausted and beaten, his whole body ached and his throat and cheek were bruised and sore from his latest encounter with Scarface. It seemed unbelievable that all this was happening to him. In some vague way he almost imagined that he would wake up in a moment and find himself clean and rested in the safety of his uncle's house. Then he heard a gentle sobbing sound. He'd almost forgotten little Munir.

"Come here," he said gently and stretched out a hand and, as kindly as he could in that darkness, drew the child to him. For a moment he held the little boy to him and was surprised to find that in his efforts to comfort the child, he was able to forget some of his own pains.

"You'll be all right, Munir," he said, "I'll look after you," and he wondered whether he could.

"I'm hungry," said Munir and cried more loudly than ever. He was obviously taking Mahmud at his word. To him Mahmud belonged to the world of adults, the people who see that there is food to eat at the proper time. He'd had more than enough of this strange, violent world where he was treated so roughly. He wanted to be told

to wash, to say his prayers and most of all to be given food. "My tummy's aching."

Mahmud realised with a shock that he was hungry too and that, among his many pains, there was a dull ache in his stomach which signalled hunger. But what could he do to get food? He realized that he must try to distract the child and so he started to question him. "Where do you come from, Munir?"

"I live in Pindi."

"How did you come to meet that man?"

"He gave me a peach and told me he'd take me somewhere, where I could get more. But he didn't. He tied me with a rope and he hit me and he didn't give me any more peaches and I'm hungry and I want to go home." It all came rushing out like a torrent, surprisingly matter of fact and clear, but ending in renewed tears.

"Well, wait a moment and I'll see what I can do," said Mahmud with more confidence than he felt, and made his way cautiously through the dark towards the door. For a moment he fumbled about and could not find it but at last he felt its rough wood beneath his hand. He felt around

and found the handle but, although it turned, he found the door was bolted on the other side. He shook the door, strangely filled all at once with a feeling of panic at not being able to get out.

"What do you want?" said a voice he did not recognize on the other side, the voice of a younger person than either Mazhar or Scarface. "You can't get out you know."

"I want some food and some water," said Mahmud. "We're both very hungry."

"Well, you'll have to be hungry," answered the voice. "I can't give you any food."

"Please," begged Mahmud. "I'll give you the money to buy something."

"How much money have you got?" came the voice uncertainly.

Mahmud thought for a moment. "Five rupees," he answered.

"Well, perhaps," said the voice, "but there won't be any change."

"Never mind," said Mahmud.

"But no tricks, mind," said the voice. "If you try to escape, they'll catch you and they'll kill you and..." for a moment he hesitated and then said in a manner so full of fear that Mahmud could have no doubt that it was sincere, "and they'll kill me too."

So frightened had the voice sounded on the last words that Mahmud thought that its owner might change his mind.

"Don't worry," he shouted. "We won't try to escape."

"Swear by the Prophet."

"I swear," said Mahmud and stood back as he heard a bolt being drawn back the other side and the door scraped open towards him.

In the light which suddenly poured in from the shop beyond, Mahmud saw silhouetted the stocky figure of a lad. At first his eyes were dazzled and he had to shield them from that sudden light, but gradually as they grew accustomed, he made out a boy not much older than himself, clad in a dirty white shalwar and kameez, his face drawn in at the cheekbones as if he were ill-fed. The boy looked nervously around as if he were afraid that

someone might discover him helping the prisoners and he quickly snapped "Right, give me the money. Quick!"

Mahmud handed him five rupees and went to speak but, before he could begin, the boy stepped back, pulled the door to and they were in an inky darkness again. Munir, who had momentarily been silenced by the activity, now started to howl with renewed vigour.

"Oh! Shut up!" said Mahmud and then immediately regretted the way he'd spoken to the child. "I'm sorry." He bent down and found Munir and started to tickle him. At first the howls only increased but soon the little boy's sobs turned to chuckles.

For what seemed a very long time, they played together in the dark and Mahmud told the little boy a story to help to pass the time. Then at last he heard the outer shop door being opened and then there was a fumbling at the door, which opened once more and again they were blinded by the light.

"Here you are," said the boy. "It's all I could get."

He offered them some chapatis and some

more tikkas and a couple of peaches. He'd also brought a tin jug full of water and a mug. Mahmud and his young companion fell on the food and devoured it like wolves. It was like a feast and Mahmud felt the strength coming back into his body.

As he recovered his strength, Mahmud began to feel more alert and, as he ate the peach, he looked around the room which was now dimly lit by the light through the half open door. It was a small but high room and contained, as far as he could make out, a number of tea chests and that was all. There was no other door but he could make out a long but narrow window which ran practically the width of the far end of the room just below the level of the ceiling. Too high to reach, he noted, unless he could stand on one of those boxes and pull himself up.

He turned to the boy standing warily in the doorway. "Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Ishtiaq," the boy replied.

"Are you one of the gang?" asked Mahmud.

"No. Well, not really, although I can't help you," he hastened to say. "I was like this boy

Munir. I was kidnapped years ago and I've been a prisoner working for them ever since."

"But what work do you do?"

"We are made to go around the streets begging," said Ishtiaq. "It's a very profitable business. You'd be surprised."

"But why haven't you run away?" asked Mahmud.

"Because they'd kill me. They wouldn't think twice about doing that and they'd kill my younger brother too. We're both prisoners. Anyway I don't know where to run to. I've no idea where my family is now. I don't have too bad a life, if I do as I'm told. But I must go. If they find I've been talking to you, they'll thrash me," and this last thought passed through his brain so vividly that he hastened to pick up the plate, jug and mug and went to go.

"Wait a moment," said Mahmud. "Suppose I escape?"

Ishtiaq looked at him in wonderment and horror. "They'd catch you and kill you," he said. "Or they might let you go because they are afraid of your uncle. But if you reported them to

the police, they'd kill that one," and he pointed to Munir who, Mahmud now saw, had curled up on the floor and gone to sleep.

"Ishtiaq," said Mahmud, "if I escape, you must stop them killing him and I'll bring help somehow."

Ishtiaq looked doubtful but at last said, "All right but I can't help you escape and you must wait until I'm no longer on guard or it will be the worse for me."

"But why can't we just walk out now?"

"Because I daren't" said Ishtiaq, "and besides, they have got my younger brother with them. They'd kill him. I must go." He hastened out, drawing to the door behind him and Mahmud heard the bolt grating in its groove.

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CHAPTER V

ESCAPE.

When Ishtiaq had left, Mahmud started to do some investigating of the contents of the room. He realized that he should not move anything yet in case Mazhar and Scarface looked in when they returned, but he made his way carefully over to where he had seen the tea chests standing. He felt inside one of them and discovered that it contained some rolls of cloth; it would be heavy for him to move alone. Then he had an idea and lifted out the rolls and took them over to where little Munir lay asleep on the floor. There he used them to make two beds and, as gently as he could, he moved the child on to one of them and settled down on the other himself.

The next thing he knew was the door scraping back and a sudden light piercing the darkness. He'd fallen asleep and now Mazhar and Scarface had returned. A torch was turned in his direction and instinctively he pretended to be fast asleep.

"The little devils have been messing around

with the cloth," Mahmud heard the voice of Scarface.

"Leave it," growled Mazhar. "If we wake them, that brat'll only start yelling again. They're asleep. Leave well alone. They won't get too much comfort from now on!"

Mahmud heard Scarface laugh knowingly and then the door closed to behind them. "I must give them some time to settle down," he thought. "It would be terrible to throw everything away through impatience."

He lay listening to the low murmur of voices in the shop and found it was very difficult to keep awake. His eyelids weighed heavily down on his eyes and, when he rubbed them, they only became sore. It was a great temptation to give way to peaceful sleep. But everything depended on his keeping awake. He quietly stood up and did some exercises, stretching out his arms and bending to touch his toes. It helped to keep him awake.

After what seemed an age, he heard Mazhar say, "Well I'm going to sleep. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," came the reply and soon there was silence.

Mahmud gave them what he imagined to be ten minutes to become fast asleep and then set quietly to work. He'd taken careful note of the position of the window and now indeed was able to make it out as a pale moonlight had begun to strike it. The box he had emptied was not far away from the wall below the window and now, simply by turning it gently over, he was able to bring it within a few inches of the wall. As he did so, he heard a rat scurry away in the darkness. He listened intently. Somehow that noise made the silence which followed seem even more profound.

Gently, taking care not to scrape the box, he moved it right up to the wall and tried to rock it with his hand to make sure it was safe. It stood quite firm. Now was the time to move! But for a moment Mahmud hesitated. What would poor Munir think when he woke and found him gone? It could not be helped. There was no possibility of his lifting the child up to that window and, in any case, if he woke him, he'd be sure to cry out and the game would be given away.

Mahmud climbed up onto the box. To his nervous ears it sounded as if he had jumped on to a drum and it seemed incredible that the two men

did not come running in straight away and discover him. He stood still and in the silence below him heard the rat patter across the floor. Then he reached up as high as he could and discovered to his dismay that his fingers reached a point about four inches below the ledge!

Despair came flooding over him again. What could he do? If he jumped and missed his grip on the ledge, he would crash down on the box and make a noise like thunder. He sat down on the edge of the box and thought for a while. Then he had an idea.

He made his way back to the bed he had made on the floor and rolled up the cloth again. It was a good length of material and would serve his purpose. He carried it across to the box and wedged it on top, right up against the wall. Now he could at least reach the ledge.

He felt the gritty surface of the ledge beneath his fingers and pressed to make sure it would not give way beneath his weight; then he started to pull himself up. His body was tired and his knees, sore from his earlier adventures, seemed to burn as he scraped them up the wall, but Mahmud was one of the best gymnasts in his school and,

most important of all, he was fit. With a tremendous effort he pulled himself up, swung up one leg and then the other and lay panting but triumphant on the narrow ledge. He was just wriggling his body round so that he could try to open the window, when Munir woke up in the room below and immediately started to cry.

"Hush!" whispered Mahmud desperately, but the wailing only increased. "Please, Munir, be quiet. You're all right," he pleaded and then he heard someone moving in the shop. He was bound to be discovered!

"Shut up!" bawled the voice of Mazhar. "Shut up or I'll come in and give you something to cry about!"

Miraculously Munir obeyed this harsh command, whimpered softly for a few moments and then was quiet. In the shop Mahmud could hear Mazhar cursing to himself and there was silence once more. Mahmud breathed a sigh of relief.

He twisted round once more to face the window. He could make out as he lay there that it opened outwards from the bottom. There was no latch, but when he pressed on the bottom, Mahmud found that the window refused to budge.

It clearly hadn't been opened for a long time. Press as he would, Mahmud could not open it; it was stuck at one end. There was nothing to do but give it a blow. If he struck it hard enough at the right place it might fly open, but the noise would surely wake the guards. The end which was stuck was near his feet and Mahmud decided to take a chance. He drew back his foot and, clinging on with his hands as hard as possible so he would not fall, crashed his chappal hard against the window frame. The window flew open.

He heard someone move in the shop and Scarface growled, "What's that?"

"It's all right, Munir," called Mahmud. "It's only a rat. It won't hurt you."

Scarface laughed and turned over and went to sleep.

Mahmud pushed his head out of the window and looked down. To his dismay he saw that the shop was built onto the steep hillside. If he dropped, he would fall a couple of hundred feet. However he could make out in the moonlight a ledge which ran along the building about five feet below the window. If he could get on to that, he might be able to make his way along

the wall and drop down on to a roof lower down which he could see away to the right.

Cautiously he put his feet out of the window and squeezed himself slowly out. There was one moment of fear as the window banged against his knuckles and he had to ease his hands out to the edge of the windowsill, but it passed and he gently lowered himself on to the ledge. This was no more than a foot wide and Mahmud pressed himself flat against the wall as he edged his way inch by inch along the back of the house.

Once over the roof, his patience exhausted, he jumped down with a crash on to the corrugated iron. It made a noise to awaken the dead but Mahmud, hesitating no longer, jumped down from the roof and hurried away in the shadows and did not wait to see whether anyone came. He scrambled away along the hillside and then clambered up to the top and out on to the road. He was free.

CHAPTER VI

DISAPPOINTMENT.

Mahmud hastened up the hill past the Post Office towards his uncle's house near Kashmir Point. He had no clear idea in his mind what he was going to do but certainly he must hurry to his uncle. The road was deserted as he hurried along and all he could hear was the jackals and in the distance the sound of thunder as a storm rolled its path along the Galis. Above him the clouds were building up and their dark mass obscured the moon so that it became very dark. As he reached the gate to his uncle's house, a cool gust of wind shook the trees and down came the rain in a sudden deluge. Mahmud felt the cool water, like a soothing balm soak through his kameez and take the soreness out of his bruises.

As he approached the door, the chaukidar appeared carrying his lamp.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"It's Mahmud. I've come to visit my uncle, Major Saeedullah Niazi."

"The Sahib's away," grumbled the chaukidar. "But you are expected. They said you'd be here yesterday afternoon."

"Well, who is here?" asked Mahmud.

At that moment the door opened and there stood his cousin, Saeed, a boy of about the same age as Mahmud but shorter in build.

"Salaam alaikum," he grinned and threw open his arms to his cousin.

"Wa-alaikum Assalaam," said Mahmud and they embraced.

"Where have you been?" said Saeed. "I thought you weren't coming when you didn't arrive last night. But come inside. My goodness!" For the first time he got a real look at Mahmud as he came into the light. "What have you been doing? You're in a terrible state."

Mahmud looked down at his clothes and saw that they were filthy and torn. "I'll explain it all to you in a moment."

They went inside and sat down in the comfortable chairs and, while they were drinking tea made by the chaukidar, Mahmud told the day's

happenings to his cousin. He felt unbearably tired and, as he talked, the exhaustion of the past hours, the comfort of the room, its sense of security and the rhythmic patter of the heavy rain outside dulled his senses and he dropped off to sleep.

Saeed looked at his cousin, wondering at the tale he had told and that he should have experienced all these adventures in one day, and decided that it would be pointless to wake him. He'd undergone too much; his body was too tired to move, his mind too exhausted to think and plan. He allowed Mahmud to sleep.

When Mahmud awoke, he felt stiff from having slept on the couch and his bruises of the previous day. "Where am I?" he thought and then all the events came flooding back into his mind and he sat up with a jerk. "Saeed ! Saeed!" he called. "What happened? What time is it?" He was filled with panic. Suppose they were too late.

"Hello, Mahmud," said Saeed as he came into the room "How are you feeling now?"

"What happened? Why didn't you wake me?" Mahmud felt angry and frustrated.

"Calm down. Calm down. I had to let you

sleep. You couldn't have done anything last night. You were too tired. Come, have a cup of tea."

Mahmud acknowledged that his cousin was right but that did not decrease his worries. "What about Munir and Ishtiaq and his brother? We must go and do something quickly."

"Father is not likely to be back today," said Saeed. "He has gone out with some of his friends to try to kill a panther that has been attacking the livestock in the forest below Dunga. He may be out for days."

"But we must do something and quickly," said Mahmud. "We must telephone the police."

They went to the 'phone and it seemed an age before they could get through to the police station. Saeed briefly explained what had happened and the police officer told them to come as quickly as possible to the Mall where he would meet them.

The boys hurried down to the Mall. It was still raining quite heavily and the early morning Murree was almost empty. A few shopkeepers were opening their shops and sweepers were chatting and calling to one another as they cleaned

the stalls. At the Post Office corner they could see a police officer standing with a couple of men. They rushed up to them and explained who they were.

"Well, come along then," said the officer. "You'd better take us to the shop straight away."

They hastened down into the Lower Mall and Mahmud looked frantically for the shop. It all looked so different in the daylight but surely that was where the pan seller had been? But the pan seller was not there yet. Still he was almost sure and the cloth shop must be a little further down on the otherside. There was no sign of a cloth shop at all but there between two shops selling fruit and vegetables stood one with its shutters still up.

"I think that's it," said Mahmud and pointed.

"Well, we'll soon see," said the officer and they hurried to the shop and banged urgently on the shutters. A hollow, empty, echoing sound came from within. "There doesn't seem to be anyone here."

Mahmud looked round frantically. They must have got away! He could hardly bear to wait while the policemen enquired at the shops

at either side. His mind was filled with Ishtiaq's dread warning. "They'd kill us all."

The policemen returned and reported to the officer. "It's a cloth shop all right, sir," they said, "and it belongs to someone named Mazhar. But apparently he went away last night and, from what they say, he is often away for days on end."

"Well, we'll have to wait for him to return," said the officer. "There's nothing much we can do now."

Mahmud was desperate. "But can't we look inside, just in case there is something?"

"What could there be?" said the officer.

"I don't know," faltered the boy. "Perhaps my case or......" but the other possibilities which occurred to him, the possibility of a dead Munir or Ishitaq was too terrible for him to say.

The officer looked at Mahmud doubtfully but when he saw the look of anxiety on the boy's face, he knew it must be genuine. "All right," he said gruffly, "but there could be trouble about this. Still, go on, break open that lock." And his two men set to work with a bar and broke it open.

The shutters were soon down and they entered. Mahmud felt glad to get away from the gaze and whispers of the quite large crowd which had by now gathered. The shop was just as it had been when he first entered it and, in that morning light-looked so normal and orderly that it scarcely seemed possible that this had been the violent threshold to his prison the night before. The bright, clean rolls of cloth, the picture of the Quaid-i-Azam over the inner door, the magazine photos of film stars and the commercial calendar hanging over the counter were so typical that, for a brief moment, Mahmud found himself wondering whether it had all in fact happened at all. However there was the door in front of him leading to the inner room.

With a sick feeling inside his stomach and the sensation of sweat breaking out on his forehead, fearful of what he might find inside, Mahmud tugged back the rusty bolt and pushed open the door. It scraped back with a sound that reminded him of Ishtiaq opening the door the night before. There were the packing cases, including the one under the window, but the roll of cloth he'd used as a step and Munir's bed were gone. They must have been tidied away. He sighed with relief; there were no bodies anyway here.

The policemen looked quickly around but there was nothing of note to be found, not even Mahmud's case. The officer turned and looked at Mahumd quizzically, "You haven't been making all of this up have you? You know it's very serious to say such things about someone if it is not true." His voice was full of disbelief and warning.

"No, of course it's true," protested Mahmud. They must believe him. "Why should I tell such lies? You must do something."

But the officer now looked rather annoyed. "I shall file the case and we shall make routine enquiries. When this man, Mazhar, returns, we shall question him and my lad, there had better be something behind what you say. False accusation is a very serious matter. Now you go off and come and report to me at the Station at 11 o'clock and I'll have you sign a statement."

Mahmud and Saeed turned and left the shop in silence. As they climbed the hill they felt the reproachful eyes of the other shopkeepers on them.

"It was true, wasn't it, Mahmud?" said Saeed.

Mahmud turned and looked at his cousin.

He felt like crying. He'd gone through so much and now the world, he'd counted on to help him, was only doubting him. "Of course it's true," he said rather bitterly. "Of course it's true."

Saeed caught the tone in his cousin's voice. "I'm sorry," he said. "Come, let's go and have something in a cafe and decide what to do next."

They walked along the Mall and went into a cafe.

"You're early," said the bearer. "What do you want?"

"Two cokes, please," said Saeed as they settled down at a table. Outside they saw the rain beginning to come down more heavily than ever.

"What we must do," said Mahmud, sucking on his straw, "is to try to imagine what they are doing."

"What do you mean?" said Saeed.

"Well, let us suppose we are in their position. We have discovered that Mahmud has escaped. We have got to get away quickly before the police arrive."

"That part's easy, but what next?" put in Saeed.

"Well first we clean up all the evidence and then we've got to go somewhere. But where?" Mahmud sucked pensively on his straw. "Either we can go somewhere else in Murree and then there would be the danger of being seen in the next couple of days, or we can go right away. We don't want to go to 'Pindi."

"Why?"

"Well, we've just come from there and in any case Munir's parents may have alerted the police there. So we must go the other way." Suddenly Mahmud stood up. "Come on," he said.

"Where are we going?" asked Saeed, surprised at this sudden movement.

"We're going to the 'bus station. They haven't got a car. They must go by 'bus," said Mahmud in an excited voice. "Come on. At least it's a chance," and he hastened out of the cafe, leaving Saeed hurriedly to pay the bill and come panting after him.

CHAPTER VII

CAUGHT AGAIN !

Mahmud walked at a great pace through the driving rain and Saeed had to run to catch up with him as he hurried down the hill to the bus station. Here despite the rain there was the usual busy activity in which nobody seemed to be doing anything very much and yet everybody gave an odd impression of doing a great deal. A car went by hooting furiously and a bus creaked its awkard gear-grinding path up round the steep corner from Sunny Bank; coolies rushed here and there and a policeman was noisily explaining something to a group of men who seemed to have missed their bus. A gang of small boys ran about aimlessly and the rain toppled down.

The two boys had no time, however, to watch the scene. They pushed their way through the crowd of men sheltering in the porch as they waited for their buses and joined a short queue at the ticket office. The man in front of them took what seemed an unbelievable amount of time to

buy his ticket, putting down the bundle he was carrying, fumbling inside his shalwar for change, asking about 'bus times and arguing the advantages and disadvantages of this route and that. Mahmud looked desperately at Saeed, "Why can't he hurry up?" Speed was so important but here it was impossible.

At last the man finished his business. "Excuse me," said Mahmud, "can you tell me whether a man with a scar down his left cheek, together with another fat man, bought tickets here this morning, probably for five people?"

The man selling tickets looked at him and seemed annoyed. "Look, if you don't want tickets, clear off. Can't you see people are waiting? I've no time to bother with questions like that. Next please."

"Please," begged Mahmud, "It's very important."

"Listen, sonny," said the man, "I have had to sell about a hundred tickets this morning. If you think I have time to...."

"Please," said Mahmud and pushed a rupee note on to the ledge. "Please try."

The man looked at the note and then at Mahmud. "Well, we'll see if I can remember," and he took the note. "What did you say he looked like?"

"One had a scar down the left side of his face and the other was big and fat," said the boy breathlessly.

"A scar, you say? Yes, there was a man with a scar, but no fat man."

"Where did he buy a ticket for?" pressed Mahmud.

"He didn't," replied the ticket seller. "He lost his temper."

Mahmud was nearly out of his mind with impatience. "Why didn't he buy a ticket?" he asked.

"Because there is no 'bus running today. From the way he carried on, you'd have thought it was my fault."

"Hey, come on hurry up," muttered the man in the queue behind the two boy. "Are you buying a ticket or aren't you? We haven't got all day."

Mahmud looked round anxiously. "One moment, please," and he turned to the ticket seller again. "Where did he want to go then?"

"To Dunga Gali," said the man, "but he couldn't. We're not running any 'buses to Abbottabad today along the Nathia Gali road. All this rain. There's likely to be landslides. Too dangerous today. I tried to explain to him but from the way he carried on you'd have thought it was my fault. He. . . ."

"Thank you," interrupted Mahmud. "Thank you for your help," and they turned away.

"Well, what do we do now?" asked Saeed as they walked away.

"We look for them," said Mahmud. "At least there's a chance they have not left Murree."

But how great was that chance? And where should they start looking? They thought of Murree sprawling out across the hills, from Kashmir Point to 'Pindi Point and down to Sunny Bank, its houses clinging to the hillside, suddenly appearing amid the pine trees as you walked along its twisting roads. It seemed hopeless.

"Well, I don't suppose they will have gone up to the Mall again," at last said Mahmud. "My bet is that they're either near here or they have walked down to Sunny Bank."

"Well, I think it'll be Sunny Bank," said Saeed. "What would be the point of waiting around here. If they go down to Sunny Bank they might be able to get a lift to Dunga Gali."

"You're right," said Mahmud. "In any case, if they were wanting to go to Dunga, they must have somewhere to go to there and we ought to be getting along that road."

They set off down the twisting road to Sunny Bank. The rain was much lighter now but a mist was settling down around the hills and clearly there was likely to be more rain. Mahmud and Saeed enjoyed the coolness of the start of the monsoon season and wondered whether it would help them by holding back Scarface and Mazhar. Certainly if it was to be a question of walking, they stood a good chance of catching up with the crooks because they would be hampered by Munir.

They soon reached Sunny Bank and started to walk along the road to see whether Scarface and Mazhar were sitting in a tea shop.

"Wait a moment," said Saeed suddenly.

"What's the matter?"

"Listen Mahmud. If you walk along here in the open, there is a greater chance of their seeing you than your seeing them. Now, let me walk along here alone. They don't know me and I think from your description I could recognize them easily enough."

"You're right," agreed Mahmud. "I'll wait here in this doorway and, if you see them, come back quickly and we'll fetch the policeman from up there."

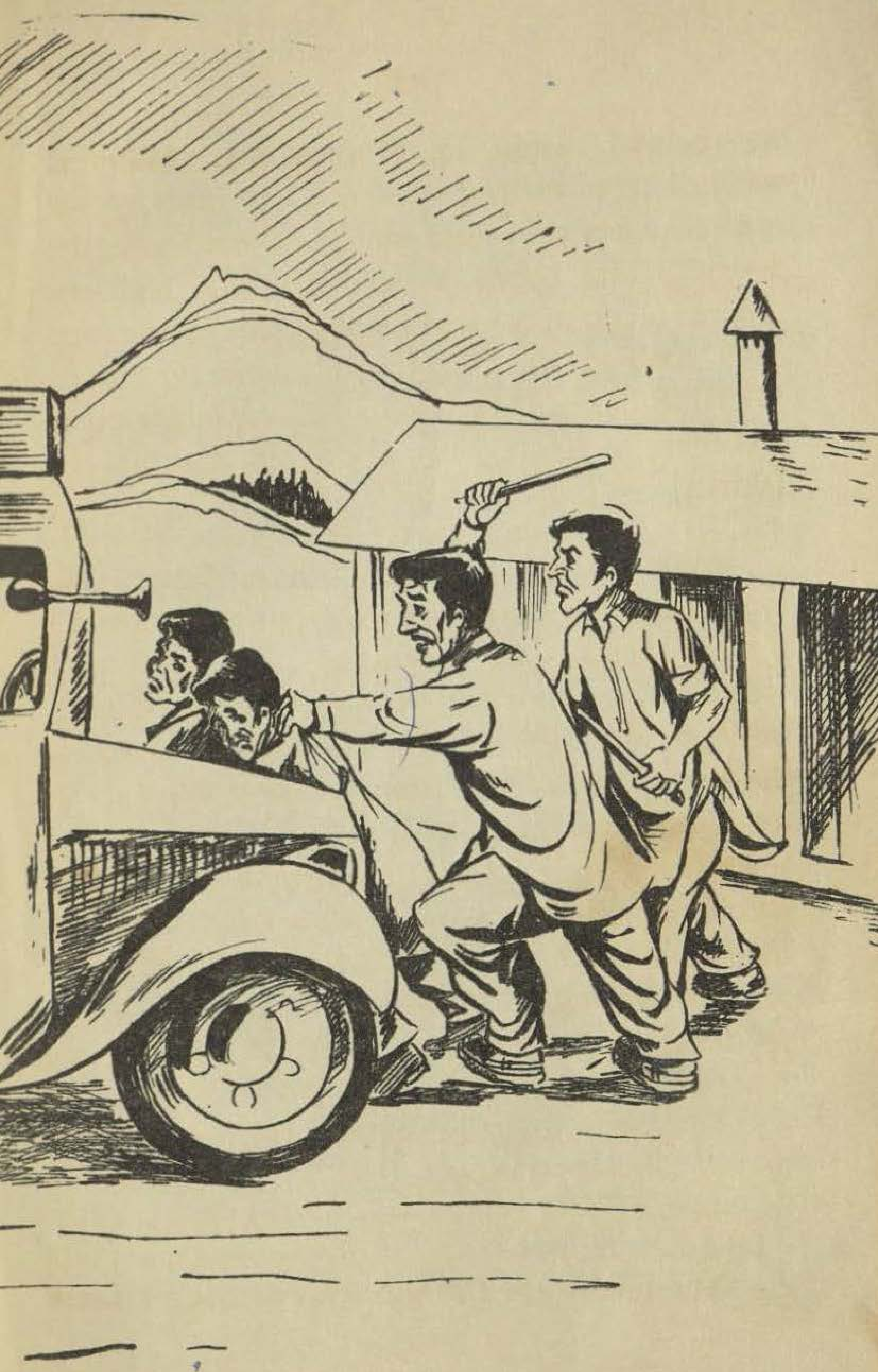
So Mahmud stepped into a doorway and watched Saeed walk off down the road, stopping now and again apparently to look into a shop but really to have a good look round. In a few minutes he was out of sight and Mahmud rested back against the door post to think.

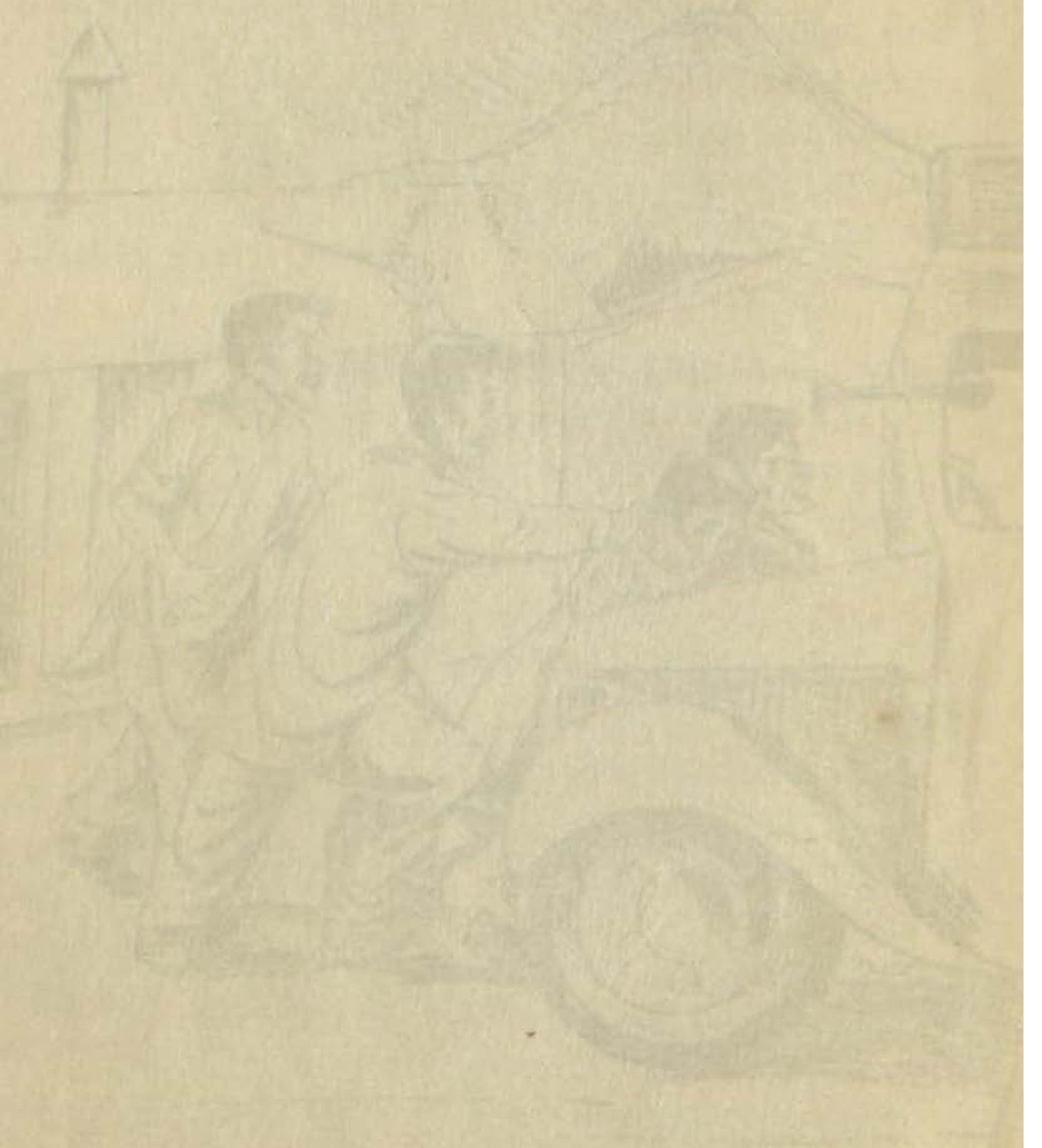
Just then a lorry drew up on the other side of the road, its decorated white sides dripping with rain, its radiator steaming from the hot climb from 'Pindi. The driver opened the door of the cab and jumped down and was joined by his mate who had been sitting in the back to signal when traffic

was behind them. In a bored way, Mahmud watched them as they walked a few yards up the road to a tea shop and sat down just inside the doorway and began to smoke. They had just ordered a cup of tea when a boy came up the road from behind the lorry and spoke to them. Mahmud thought the boy looked vaguely familiar and then, as he turned, he recognized him as Ishtiaq!

Mahmud felt his heart beating faster. He looked quickly down the road but there was no sign of Saeed. He wondered for a moment whether to call out but remembered that Ishtiaq's brother was still in the kidnappers' clutches. Suddenly the two men from the lorry stood up in an agitated fashion and walked down behind their lorry with Ishtiaq. Mahmud ran quickly across the road to try to see what was happening. Somehow he knew the men were in danger. He must warn them. He stepped quietly down towards the lorry and was just in time to see Scarface and a man he did not recognize step out from a doorway behind the two men. They had iron bars in their hands. They were going to hit the lorry driver and his mate over the head.

Mahmud started to shout a warning. "Look





...” but he got no further than that. Helpless he watched the two men struck brutally to the ground as a strong hand grasped him round the mouth and pulled him savagely back.

“I wondered when we'd meet again, my friend,” he heard the snarling voice of Mazhar, “and this time you won't get away so easily.”

Mahmud stood helpless in Mazhar's bear-like grip and watched while Scarface and the other men bundled the unconscious bodies of the lorry driver and his mate into the back of the lorry.

“Munawar, come here quickly,” called Mazhar. “Here's an old friend of ours who wants to come for a ride. Get him in the back and hurry up. Make sure he doesn't shout out.”

Scarface leered viciously at Mahmud. “With pleasure,” he said and seized hold of the boy fiercely, gripping his mouth brutally with his hand so that Mahmud felt as if his head was about to be wrenched from his body. He opened his mouth and sank his teeth deep into Scarface's fingers. Scarface gave a little gasp and cursed but did not relax his grip, but instead gave him a sharp kick. He then bundled him along the side of the lorry to the back. Mahmud felt

himself lifted bodily into the air as if he were a sack and he was crashed down into the back of the lorry. As he fell, his head banged hard against the side of a wooden crate. Mahmud lay there limp and dazed; he was a prisoner again.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ROAD TO DUNGA GALI.

The lorry jerked off up the hill away from Sunny Bank. As Mahmud began to recover, someone seized hold of his hands and tied them roughly behind his back. A rather dirty piece of rag was pulled tight across his mouth, between his teeth, and fastened at the back of his head. They were taking no chances.

He looked around him and saw that with him in the back were Ishtiaq and a boy a little younger whom Mahmud took to be his brother, Munir and Scarface. Presumably Mazhar and the other man whom Mahmud had seen at Sunny Bank were in the cab. In the corner, still unconscious, were the lorry driver and his mate. Of Saeed, there was no sign. Well at least there was some slight hope of help from that quarter.

As the lorry made up the hill, Scarface was busying himself tying up the two men who were now beginning to revive. Them he not only gagged but blindfolded as well. Obviously they

did not intend to have any more eye witnesses who could cause them trouble. Mahmud shuddered when he thought that he was an eyewitness who would have to be dealt with otherwise. When he looked at Scarface's cruel face, he had little doubt that disposal of a witness would not cause him much trouble of conscience searching. The three boys sat glumly in the corner, not saying a word.

After a few minutes the lorry came to a halt and Mahmud heard Mazhar speaking to someone on the road, "What's the matter?"

"You'd better not go along the Nathia road today," said the voice. "With all this rain, there's likely to be landslides."

"Is the road closed?" said Mazhar.

"No," said the voice, probably that of a policeman thought Mahmud frustrated because help was so close at hand, "but I shouldn't be surprised if you can't get through. The telephone line is down."

"Well, we must go on," said Mazhar. "I've promised to pick some stuff up in Nathia this afternoon. Any way we can at least get to Barian."

"Well, good luck," said the voice and the engine revved up and they were on their way again.

For a while the lorry swung its way down the road, seeming to go far too fast for what Mahmud remembered was a steep and twisting descent, and then with a crashing of gears, it began to climb steeply again, its engine straining against the gradient so that the whole of the lorry shuddered as it slowly wound its way upwards. Across the hills the lightning suddenly cracked and, with a deafening fusillade of thunder, the rain came down again in a deluge.

After a considerable amount of time, the lorry's engine stopped straining, it purred an easier note, and the lorry cruised on a short way before coming to a halt. Once more Mazhar argued with someone on the road about whether it was advisable to go on further. "It must be Barian," thought Mahmud. But Mazhar was clearly going to be daunted by no one and once again the engine roared and the lorry began to climb.

The lorry driver and his mate were by now conscious and, although their eyes were covered, Mahmud could imagine how bewildered they must feel. But he was helpless too, although he was

glad he was allowed to see. Ishtiaq, his brother and Munir sat huddled together in the corner, soaked by the rain with which the lorry was now more or less awash inside. Scarface sat crouched opposite to Mahmud underneath a piece of sacking. He was scowling, annoyed that he had to sit out in the rain while Mazhar and the other man sat in the cabin. And all the time the lorry climbed up and its engine laboured and the wheels crunched alarmingly on the loose stones which made the road from now on.

Suddenly the engine spluttered and died. Mahmud heard the starter being pressed but give a shrill whine and die away. Scarface stood up and looked over the side. "What is it?" he asked.

There was the sound of the cab door opening and Mazhar's voice. "The engine's overheated. We should have cooled it off at that last village but I didn't think it wise to stop. Still we can get rid of our two friends here."

Then Mazhar and the other man, whom Mahmud now saw clearly for the first time, tall and strongly built but with one eye obviously sightless so that it appeared to be staring to one side in

an alarming fashion, clambered into the back of the lorry. They joined Scarface and called Ishtiaq to help them.

"Come on," said Mazhar, "we'll put them out here. If we carry them a little way down over the edge behind the trees no one will find them for some time."

"You're not going to leave them there to die?" said Ishtiaq with horror in his voice.

"No, we'll not do that," said Mazhar. "Murder would start a real man hunt. We'll knock them out again and untie them. By the time they've recovered, we'll be well on our way, and it's a mile back to the last village and there won't be any transport there."

The other two men laughed at the thoughtfulness of their leader and with a great deal of puffing and panting the four of them lifted the two men out.

"Come on, we'll take them down there," Mahmud heard Mazhar say.

Mahmud, as soon as the gang had left, started to struggle with his bonds. Ishtiaq's brother, a boy of about twelve, was moving

towards him as if to help when suddenly he stopped; he was looking in surprise and amazement above Mahmud's head towards the back of the lorry.

"Hush," Mahmud heard an urgent whisper and looked round. There, his hair hanging in a dripping, tangled fringe over his eyes, his face covered with mud, was Saeed!

"Hush," said Saeed, "I don't think we've much time at the moment. I just wanted to let you know I'm with you. Oh! here they come. Cheerio!" and that tousled head disappeared from view as quickly as it had come.

Mahmud relaxed and lay back and for the first time for some hours smiled to himself. "Good old Saeed!" He must have seen what happened at Sunny Bank and hung on to the back of the lorry. Goodness, he must have had a terrible ride! But he was there all right and with him, hope.

He now heard the sound of his captors' voices again. They were arguing about who should travel in the back and, this time, it was not Scarface who climbed in with Ishtiaq but the other man.

Mahmud heard the cabin door slam shut and this time the engine roared into life straightway and the lorry went on its jolting way. Mahmud wondered whether Saeed was again hanging on to the back.

It was several miles further on, after an engine testing climb to Changla Gali and giddy, hair-raising descent the other side, that Mahmud heard a sudden, ominous rumbling and the splintering crash of trees in front and the lorry jolted to a halt so hard that he and the others in the back were sent sprawling from their sitting positions. All except Mahmud, who found it difficult to move because his hands were tied, jumped immediately to their feet and looked over the side. Mahmud heard Mazhar, in front, cursing.

"Come on get down," he said. "We'll have to shift some of this. Bring that boy, Mahmud. We'll need all the hands we can get for this."

The man in the back pulled Mahmud roughly to his feet. "Come on you," he said, "and no monkey tricks. I warn you that if you try anything funny, someone will pay for it."

Mahmud stood and let the man untie the gag

and the rope which tied his hands. It was an immense relief to be able to breathe properly again and he gulped down great draughts of the sweet, rain fresh, air filled with the scent of the giant cedars. His arms ached from the position in which they had been tied and his hands tingled as the blood began to flow in them again. Already he was casting about in his mind for a way to escape but as soon as he was down to the road, Mazhar stood in front of him.

"Listen to me, my lad," he said. "Don't try to escape or one of you will die. If you get away, I shall kill Munir. Don't think I'd hesitate. Now come round here all of you."

They made their way to the front of the lorry and Mahmud saw what had made the noise. There, only a few yards in front of the lorry, was a pile of rocks and a cedar which had crashed down blocking the road.

"That was a close thing," said Mazhar. "If it had happened a second later there wouldn't have been much left of us or the lorry."

"Well, let's get a move on," said Scarface, who kept looking uneasily up at the rock towering above them. "We don't know what else may come."

And as if to give point to his haste, a few small rocks and loose earth came hissing down on to the road beside them. They all pressed against the lorry for a moment, but then all was silent again except for the steady beat of the rain on the road and the lorry.

Quickly they set to work. The first job was to move the tree. Mazhar found a log with which to lever the bottom and the rest got to the end near the rock face, a mass of torn roots and loose earth. They pushed and sweated but the tree was heavy and Mahmud was just beginning to think they would never move it when it suddenly moved, slid with amazing speed towards the edge of the road, poised there a moment, then swung its roots high in the air freed from their pushing hands and shoulders, and went toppling down the precipitous hillside. They all stood at the edge of the road for a moment, captors and captives curiously united for a brief spell in the achievement of a difficult task, and watched the tree as it crashed downwards, shattering everything in its path before it finally came to rest a hundred feet below.

"Now, let's get these rocks moved. If we move the big ones that will do," said Mazhar, and they turned back to their work. It did not take

them long to clear a path just wide enough for the lorry, by moving four or five large boulders and letting them roll down over the edge.

"All right, get aboard again," shouted Mazhar. "Let's get going."

"Shall I tie up this young monkey again?" Mahmud heard Scarface ask, and his heart sank again at the thought of that stinking rag.

"No, don't bother," said Mazhar. "I've warned him what will happen if he tries anything." Mahmud sighed with relief.

They climbed aboard the lorry again and made themselves as comfortable as they could in the pools of rainwater which lay in the back. And still the rain came down.

Mazhar clambered up into the cab and slammed it shut. The engine spluttered and roared into life. The wheels whirled round trying to find a grip on the loose surface of the road. Above their heads there was a crash like that of thunder. Mahmud looked up. Branches flew in the air, hurling pine needles up in a green cloud. The mountain was sliding down on to them.

CHAPTER IX

THINGS GET WORSE.

As the lorry slithered on the loose surface and Mazhar made a desperate effort to escape from beneath the landslide, Mahmud threw himself across the lorry and onto Munir in an effort to protect him from the worst of the fusillade of stones that came raining down. The others threw themselves flat against the side of the truck as a huge boulder crashed down in the middle with a terrifying crunch of wood and metal. But by some miracle Mazhar managed to drive the lorry forward a few yards until, blinded by the dirt that filled the air and splattered all over the windscreen, he turned the wheel too far to one side and crashed the lorry into the hillside. Nevertheless, for the moment at least, they had escaped the worst of the landslide and with as much speed as was possible in the confusion and panic, captors and captives alike jumped from the lorry to the ground.

Mahmud had picked Munir up or he would surely have been abandoned. In the midst of the others, he struggled away from the lorry carrying

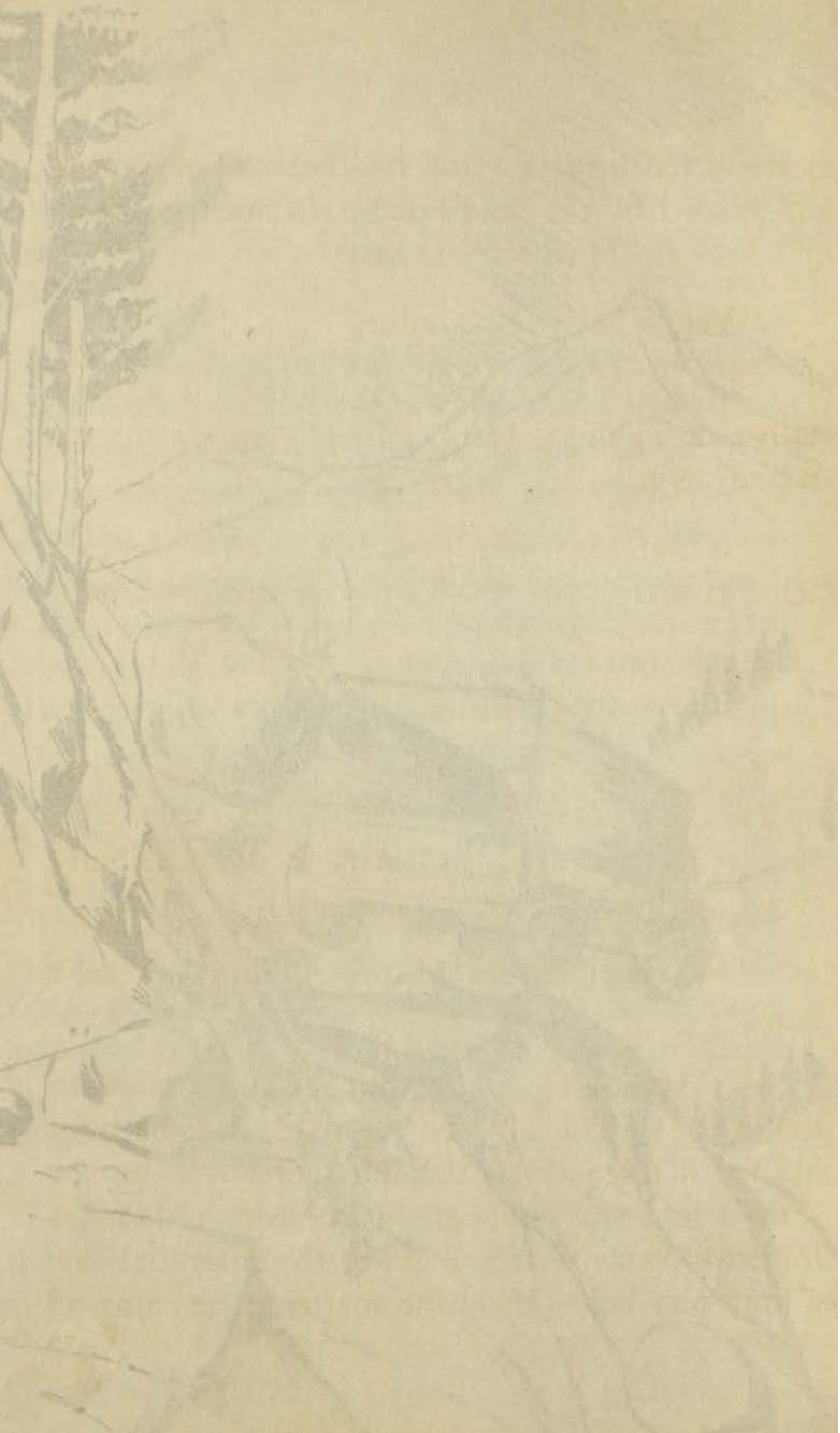
the small boy and about thirty yards further on sank breathless to the ground. As he looked back, he was just in time to see a terrible scene of destruction.

Behind the lorry the brown, sodden earth had piled high and a gigantic rock which must have hit them, had Mazhar failed to get the lorry to move, blocked the road. But just then, with a deafening roar, throwing clouds of dirt into the air, there came rolling down the hill a huge rock, which uprooted with an earsplitting crack a tree which stood in its path, bounced on the edge of the cliff above the lorry as if it were a rubber ball, and hit the cab with a deafening bang, and went toppling over the precipice. The lorry rolled after it.

For a couple of minutes they all sat there, exhausted by the effort and excitement, and watched the air clear of its cloud of dirt, splintered wood and pine needles. Then Mazhar spoke. "Come on. There's no point in sitting around here. We'll have to walk."

Then a terrible thought struck Mahmud so that he nearly shouted out. Where was Saeed? Suppose he'd jumped on to the back of the lorry


STOP



as it started up again and had been knocked off and buried by the landslide? He must go back and look. "Mazhar," he said.

"Yes, what's the matter?"

"Mazhar, I dropped my money from my shalwar as I jumped down. There may be a chance of finding it."

"What! In that mess?" said Mazhar. "Don't talk rubbish. Come on; we must go."

"But it won't take a second," pleaded Mahmud, "and it was fifty rupees."

"Fifty rupees?" put in Scarface quickly. "It won't take a moment, Mazhar. I'll go back with him." His greedy eyes flashed at the possibility of getting hold of money.

"All right," said Mazhar, "but don't take long."

So Mahmud and Scarface walked back to the debris which blocked the road, the one hoping for a few rupees, the other dreading lest he should find the body of his cousin. Mahmud looked down over the edge of the road and saw a long way below them the shattered remains of

the lorry, a trail of splintered white wood scattered over the hillside. He shivered and turned the rocks but found no trace of Saeed. He searched around diligently in case he should find something belonging to his cousin and Scarface searched for money.

"Come on," shouted Mazhar "We can't waste any more time. I've no desire to be caught in the forest in the dark!"

The two searchers trudged back to join the rest of the party. Mahmud had done all he could but could not help wondering whether Saeed had really escaped. He realized that there was nothing to be done except hope.

It was not far from the scene of the landslide to the village of Dunga Gali and after about half a mile, Mazhar called their battered procession to a halt. "Right," he said, "we'll split our little party here."

Scarface looked at him in surprise. "Split? What do you mean?"

"Well, Munawar, we've now got to walk through the village. I don't trust our young friend Mahmud. I think he may run off and call for help, but I think we can prevent it. I shall allow

you all to go ahead and, when I am sure that you are through the village, I shall come along with my little hostage, Munir." He then seized hold of Munir and walked him over quickly to Mahmud. "Do you understand, Mahmud?" he said in a voice suddenly harsh and threatening. "Any nonsense from you, as you go through the village, and I shall not hesitate to kill your young friend," and as if to make his point clear, he pulled out from his belt a wicked looking knife. "You do understand, don't you?"

Mahmud looked at the knife and then at the pleading, terrified face of Munir. "I understand," he said.

"Well, get a move on then," snapped Mazhar, "and wait for me along the pipeline."

The first party then moved off, Scarface and the other man laughing at the ingenuity of their chief, the boys walking in a dispirited line. As they entered the village, the rain at last stopped, and looking up they saw a blue patch in the clouds and the bright rays of the sun. On the village corner stood a couple of men talking and in a tea shop at the side, other men were talking unconcernedly together and passing round a hookah.

Scarface waved a greeting to them and they went on their way.

They turned right and started to walk along a narrow kutcha road which lead along the mountain's edge. Even at this time, Mahmud could not help marvelling at the view that greeted his eyes. The road skirted along the edge of the mountain which towered above them on their right and fell away again sheer on their left. The sun now shone strongly and illumined, in the depths below them, a rich, lush green forest which stretched away in a deep valley embraced by two spurs of mountain, while in the far distance radiant in the sun and clearly visible after the rains there glistened whitely the great snowcapped peaks of Kashmir. Mahmud realized that he must be walking along the famous pipeline which carried water from the great tanks at Dunga Gali, across the hills, to Murree.

When they had turned the corner and were out of sight of the village, Scarface called a halt and they sat down and waited for Mazhar. Mahmud tried to catch Ishtiaq's eye but he sat, crouched up, his eyes downcast, one arm round his younger brother's shoulder. After about ten minutes, Mazhar appeared with Munir.

"Well, that's that," he said. "I'm glad to see our little friend is learning some wisdom. Still we mustn't waste time. Let us get on to our little home. There's no place like home, they say," and he laughed at his bitter joke so that his fat sides rocked.

They walked on for about half a mile and then Mazhar stopped again. "Now we must leave this pleasant little path," he said, "and take to the forest."

He climbed through the iron rail which ran along the cliff edge and Mahmud saw that at this point it was possible to clamber down on to rocks and go down into the great forest in the valley. Mazhar, puffing and sweating freely, led the way, Munir and Ishtiaq came next, then Mahmud followed closely by Scarface, and then Ishtiaq's brother and the other man. Mahmud looked round him. He knew that he could easily escape if he darted off into the trees, but then they would kill Munir. It was hopeless.

They clambered down slowly and the forest closed above their heads, the branches of the tall cedars and pines hiding the sky, while monkeys chattered and whisked away through the trees.

Mahmud thought what a lovely place it would be if the circumstances were different and how he would have loved to have climbed up and down here with Saeed.

They must have climbed down about five hundred feet when they came on to a flat platform and Mahmud realized that they were standing on the roof of a mud house.

"Well, here we are," said Mazhar. "Home, sweet home!" and once again his great belly rocked with laughter. "Come along in."

They jumped down on to the rocks and went round to the front of the house. Mazhar produced a key from inside his shalwar and opened the padlock which held the door. The boys were pushed inside and then into an inner room. The door was shut to behind them and once again Mahmud heard the sickening grating of a bolt in its groove. And this time his prison was further from help.

CHAPTER X.

THE ATTEMPT.

The four boys sat in the ill-lit room and stared disconsolately at one another. Mahmud walked around to examine the possibilities of escape but they did not seem very bright. There was only one small window in the wall opposite the door and this had a couple of bars in it. He considered whether it was feasible to dislodge these but, although it would not be too difficult physically, there seemed little chance of their doing it unheard. He returned to where the others were sitting on the ground.

"Well, it's time we met," he said to Ishtiaq's brother in an effort to break the gloom which weighed down so heavily on them all. "What's your name?"

The boy looked up at him. "Tajassur," he said. "What are you going to do?"

Mahmud suddenly realized that they were all depending on him. They had endured this im-

prisonment for years and no thought of escape could come from Ishtiaq or his brother. And he realized too that he must seem to have failed them. Had he not escaped once and hadn't even that proved futile? He had to give them hope and make them believe in the possibility of escape. The eyes of the other three boys were turned to him and, whether he wanted it or not, he was the leader.

"Don't worry," he said. "Everything is going to be all right."

Ishtiaq snorted. "And what do you mean by that?" he said. "Have you got a plan? They won't let you get away so easily a second time."

Mahmud thought quickly. "But this time we are not alone. There is help outside."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Ishtiaq. "What help?"

"My cousin, Saeed, was with me at Sunny Bank. He saw everything that happened and what is more, he was hanging on the back of the lorry."

"The back of the lorry?" Ishtiaq looked at Mahmud wide eyed. "But the lorry, the lorry went over the edge," he stammered. "If Saeed were on the lorry, then."

"I know," Mahmud hurriedly said. The thought that Saeed might have been on the lorry when the landslide hit it kept drumming in his mind. "I know, but I went back and there was no sign."

"You mean you hadn't really lost any money?" said Tajassur.

"No, I just had to have an excuse to go back. I'm sure Saeed's still alive."

"Perhaps," said Ishtiaq doubtfully but his trust in Mahmud was clearly a little restored by the trick he had played on Mazhar and Munawar. "Let us hope in any case that he gets here soon."

For a while they sat in silence and listened to the low hum of their captors' voices in the other room. Then Mahmud again turned to Ishtiaq and said, "Are they going to keep you locked up all the time now? What do you think they are planning to do with us?"

"They'll let me out of here in a little while," said Ishtiaq. "I shall have to cook their evening meal." He looked at Mahmud and there was fear in his eyes. "I don't know what they will do to you. You see they are afraid that if they try to

keep you prisoner, your uncle will start a search and yet, if they don't hold you, you will bring the police."

Mahmud smiled to himself. It wa good to know that he'd set the kidnappers a poser but it was frightening to think how they were likely to answer the problem.

"When you go out, Ishtiaq," he said, "you must try to find out their plans. *Insha Allah*, Saeed will come in time."

Just then they heard the bolt being drawn back on the other side and Scarface entered. He scowled round at the four of them. "What are you talking about?" ne growled. "You'd better not try anything again. Come here, Ishtiaq. It's time you started to get our food ready." He looked around at the others again and laughed. "There may be some scraps for you."

Ishtiaq scrambled to his feet and, with a short wistful look toward Mahmud and Tajassur, he went out through the door, followed by Scarface. Mahmud turned to the other two. Munir had been very quiet and withdrawn all through the day. He had obviously given up in a world which he did not understand and which did not seem to

understand him. Tajassur smiled and looked more encouraging. He dug his hand into the pocket of his shalwar and pulled out a grubby fistful of grams.

"Come on," he said. "Have some grams," and they cheerfully fell to eating.

Soon the door was pushed open and in came Ishtiaq carrying a pile of chappaties and a couple of mangoes. He closed the door behind him and they sat on the ground and started to eat. For a time the task occupied them fully and then Ishtiaq turned to Mahmud, casting a glance towards the door as he did so. "Mahmud, you've got to get away," he said.

"I know," said Mahmud, somewhat surprised at what seemed a statement of the obvious. "We've all got to get away. *Insha Allah*, Saeed will be here soon. He must be planning something."

"No, you don't understand," said Ishtiaq. "I mean you've got to get away and quickly."

Mahmud caught a note of alarm in Ishtiaq's voice. "What do you mean?" he asked, but from

the look in Ishtiaq's eyes he could guess what he meant.

"They're planning to kill you," Ishtiaq whispered so that Munir should not hear. "They are afraid of what will happen if you get away. And they're going to do it tonight."

Mahmud was stunned by the information. He'd realized that this was a danger, but to have the possibility harden into a fact and to know time was so short made him shudder.

"You've been outside," he said. "Was there no sign of Saeed?"

"I couldn't see him," answered Ishtiaq.

Mahmud pondered the problem. "Is there likely to be any time when they will not all be here? That would be our best chance."

"Yes," said Ishtiaq excitedly, "there will be a time when only Mazhar will be here. You see they've a couple of buffalo which are out at present. Normally I'd be sent to fetch them, but tonight they're afraid in case I run to get help. So Scarface will go."

"But what about the other man?" put in Mahmud.

"Alamgir? He'll go too. Scarface is afraid to go in the forest in the dark alone. They'll both go."

"Do you think that you may be out in the other room when they go?" asked Mahmud.

"They'll call me out in a minute to clean up the place," said Ishtiaq. "I could try to make the work last for some time."

"Good," said Mahmud. "You must make it last until they have gone and then try to get this door open for us."

"Do you think we can manage Mazhar?" asked Ishtiaq doubtfully.

"We've got to," said Mahmud. "They're three of us," and he looked round at little Munir, "and, of course, one in reserve!"

They laughed and the atmosphere became a little easier. But there was no time for relaxation, for they heard the door being pushed open and Scarface looked in.

"Come on, Ishtiaq." he said. "Work to do."

Ishtiaq scrambled up and, with one look back at Mahmud followed Scarface. The door closed again and the three boys went over to it and listened intently for what was happening the other side. They could hear Ishtiaq clattering about. He was clearly being very clumsy and Mahmud heard Mazhar scolding him.

"What's wrong with you? Get a move on, can't you, you clumsy oaf?"

"Mazhar," Mahmud heard Ishtiaq say, "I'm sure you needn't kill Mahmud. He'll listen to reason," he pleaded.

Mazhar laughed. "Do you think I'm a fool?" he said. "I've seen people like him before. They never give up. They're not like you; they've got guts! But don't look so hurt. If you'd got guts, you'd be dead by now." He laughed again. "Anyway, Munawar," he went on, "you had better go and bring the animals in." There was a moment's hesitation. "All right, you can take Alamgir with you. And watch out for the ghosts!"

Mahmud heard the other two get up from their chairs, grumbling, and a moment later the outer door shut to. "Those two haven't got any guts either," said Mazhar. "Now get on with your work."

Ishtiaq busied himself the other side and within a couple of minutes had worked his way round so that he was next to the door. Mahmud heard the bolt being drawn back with amazing care. "Well done, Ishtiaq!" he thought and beckoned to Tajassur to be ready, and put a forefinger to his lips to signal that they should be silent.

The two of them crouched by the door and Mahmud pulled it a little ajar. It scraped back the few inches and the noise to their worried ears seemed deafening. At that moment in the outer room Ishtiaq dragged the table to one side across the floor. Mahmud silently blessed him and under the cover of the table's noise pulled the door open. The two of them stepped into the doorway. Mazhar stood opposite to them but looking the other way.

Ishtiaq spoke. "Mazhar, what's this?" and pointed to something under a chair which was across the room from them. For a moment, Mazhar turned so that his back was to the boys and he half stooped and in that brief time Mahmud and Tajassur hurled themselves across the room and crashed into Mazhar's gigantic body simultaneously, Tajassur hitting him below the knees and Mahmud at the back of the neck.

Mazhar crashed to the floor and the three boys piled on top of him. But Mazhar, once he'd recovered from the shock of that first devastating impact, showed that he had not forgotten all he'd learnt in the war in Burma. With a great convulsion of his body, he pushed the boys from him although they still hung grimly on to his arms and legs. Another mighty heave threw Ishtiaq and his brother to one side and he jumped up and drew back his fist to strike Mahmud, when there shot like an arrow across the room the small body of Munir, who took off through the air and hit Mazhar with a resounding bang in the middle of his huge stomach. All the venom which had been boiling up in the small boy in the last thirty six hours was concentrated in that blow, and Mazhar crashed down to the ground again with a sigh like the bellows of an old harmonium as all the breath rushed out of him.

"Well done, the reserves!" said Mahmud and they pinned the breathless man to the ground. Quickly Ishtiaq brought a rope and they had their prisoner secure before he could recover.

"Now, let's go!" said Mahmud and they turned to the door. As they did so, the door was pushed open and there on the threshold stood Scarface and the man called Alamgir. And in Scarface's hand there gleamed a wicked looking knife.

CHAPTER XI

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN INTO THE FIRE.

"What an interesting little scene," sneered Scarface as he glared across to where the four boys stood over the bound body of Mazhar. "Who's been stupid now, Mazhar?" He grinned and he stepped into the room.

Mahmud and his three friends watched nervously as Scarface walked towards them fingering the point of his knife as he approached. Behind him, Alamgir stood blocking the doorway, darting glances this way and that with his one good eye, but with the unmistakable attitude of one who actually hopes for trouble. Once again Mahmud felt his hopes dashed to the ground.

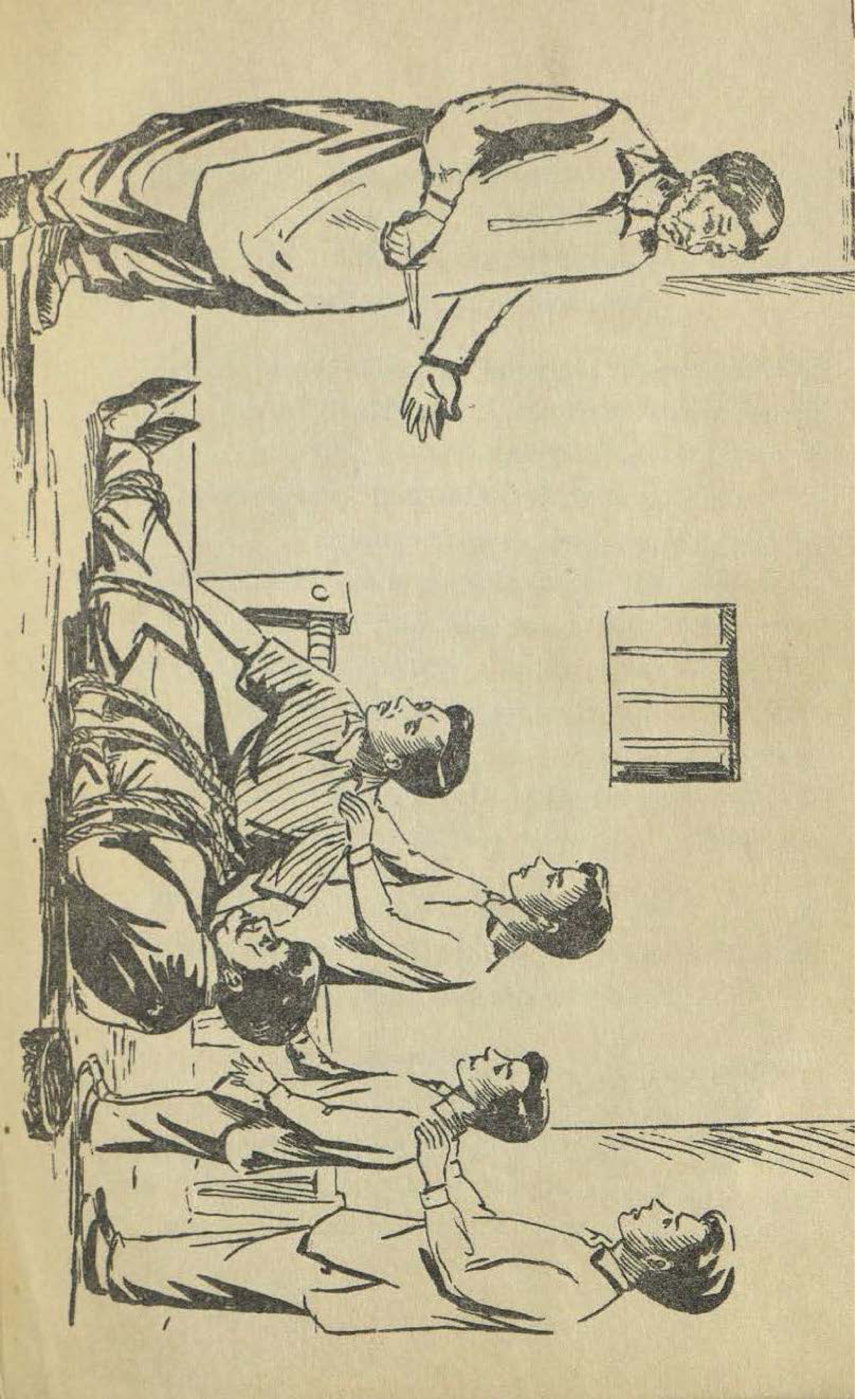
"All right," snarled Scarface, "get him untied, and be quick about it."

Mahmud looked desperately round but there was no weapon to hand. To go against that knife which Scarface held so purposefully in his hand would be foolish. The other three boys turned to him and he nodded to them.

"Come on," he said. "We must untie him". And as he bent to undo the rope with which they had bound Mazhar, he was filled with the sickening realization that now he must die.

Scarface took one step towards them. Mahmud looked up at the knife. He must make one last effort. At least he had nothing to lose and if he could disarm Scarface there was some hope. He turned slightly to one side and wondered how he could distract Scarface's attention for a split second to give himself a chance to dive and knock that knife out of his hand, when there was a thud, a short cry behind Scarface, and Alamgir who had been standing grimly in the doorway slumped to the ground. Scarface for a brief moment turned his head and Mahmud, desperation quickening his usual agility, hurled himself at Scarface who crashed to the floor.

There was a mighty flurry of arms and legs as Scarface flailed out at his assailant. Although he had been thrown to the ground, he still grasped the knife and now he swung it over at Mahmud. The boy rolled nimbly to one side and, keeping a careful eye on that flashing blade, seized hold of Scarface's wrist above it. He threw the whole of his weight on to the arm and for a few seconds



held it pinned to the ground.

Scarface, with a great convulsive effort, twisted over on top of the boy, who hung for dear life on to his wrist. With a tremendous jerk the man pulled himself and the boy to their feet.

But help was at hand. Ishtiaq jumped over the bound body of Mazhar and leapt on to Scarface's back and, throwing his arm round his neck, heaved with all his might, and pulled Scarface back on to to the floor. They lay in a writhing, twisting, kicking heap, Ishtiaq pinned underneath the combined weight of Scarface and Mahmud who clung desperately to one another. With another mighty heave, Scarface pulled himself free from Ishtiaq and on to the top of Mahmud. The boy strained with a strength beyond his years to hold off the knife which now was inches from his throat.

"Watch out!" Mahmud heard the voice of Saeed and twisted to one side as his cousin crashed a thick branch down on Scarface's head.

Scarface grunted and momentarily loosened his grip on the knife. Mahmud seized hold of his fingers and the knife fell to the floor. Tajassur kicked it into the corner of the room. Then they all piled on to Scarface; Mahmud, Ishtiaq,

Tajassur and Saeed and, although he struggled, the dazed man was no match for their combined weight. The four of them sat triumphantly on top of him and held him fast to the ground.

"Munir, find some rope!" shouted Mahmud, and the small boy dived under a charpie and emerged triumphantly holding a length of rope.

As quickly as they could, they fastened Scar-face's arms and legs and he was held secure. The boys jumped to their feet. Mahmud turned grinning to his cousin. "Saeed," he said, "thank God you arrived in time!"

Saeed grinned back at him. He was covered from head to foot with mud. "I wouldn't have missed this fight for worlds," he said.

"But how did you get here?" started Mahmud, but just then he heard a groan from the door. Alamgir was recovering.

The boys leapt on the bewildered man as he gazed glassily with his one good eye at the scene before him. There was no difficulty in overpowering him in that condition and they soon had him bound hand and foot.

At last they were able to relax. The relief was wonderful and they threw their arms around one another in a triumphal embrace.

"Saeed, how did you manage it?" asked Mahmud, when they'd got over the flush of excitement. "How did you escape the landslide?"

Saeed looked at them and his teeth gleamed white through his covering of reddish brown mud. "I jumped off when the lorry first stopped," he said, "and was just about to climb on again when I saw the rocks coming down above us. I ran as fast as I could backwards and could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw you escape. I then followed at a distance. In the forest I lost you and was wandering around when Scarface and his friend came to collect their buffalo. I followed them here and hit that one over the head with my stick."

"And just in time too," laughed Mahmud. "Well, we're all safe and together now."

"What do we do now?" asked Ishtiaq.

"We must go to fetch the police," said Mahmud.

"In the dark?" said Tajassur, wide-eyed.

"Yes," laughed Mahmud. "We'll be all right together. Come on; let's make sure they don't escape while we're away."

They quickly went round the three men and made sure that they could not loosen their bonds. Scarface and Alamgir merely glared at them. When they came to Mazhar he looked at them and smiled.

"Surely you won't hand us over to the police?" he said. "We wouldn't have harmed you really and the police will never believe your tale anyway."

Mahmud smiled at him. "Won't they?" he said. "We'll see. Anyway we'll ask Ishtiaq whether you'd hurt us. Do they deserve to be freed?" he asked Ishtiaq.

"Never!" said Ishtiaq. "Let's get the police quickly."

The boys took one last look round and went out into the forest. They padlocked the door behind them and made their way into the darkness beyond, lighting their way with a lamp they'd taken from the house. The light cast the shadows menacingly behind them and they kept nervously together. But the air was sweet and free.

They started to clamber over the rocks among the trees. Occasionally above their heads they caught glimpses of a starry sky. The air around smelt perfumed and fresh after the rain. Their spirits rose and they helped one another up the steep climb. Then they stood still in their tracks. Not many yards to their right they heard a deep-throated cough and a rumbling growl.

"My God," said Saeed, "It's the panther!"

CHAPTER XII

THE PANTHER.

The boys stood absolutely still. Ishtiaq dropped the lamp and it went out. Around them they could hear the noises of the night, the shrill call of the crickets, the pines rustling in the gentle breeze and far above them the barking of dogs. They strained their ears to catch again that dreadful deep-throated cough but now they could hear nothing. But they were sure it was a panther. Mahmud recalled Saeed telling him that his uncle was away hunting a panther in the forest below Dunga Gali. He had forgotten all about it in the excitement of the day. If he had remembered he would never have suggested that they should venture out into the forest by night. He had forgotten and he'd made a mistake.

"Don't make a sound," he whispered to the others; he wet his forefinger and raised it in the air. The wind was blowing from the direction where they'd heard the panther. At least it would not have their scent. But surely it must have

heard them? They'd been making no attempt to keep quiet. Rather, in their excitement and their secret fears of the dark, they had been making a noise to reassure themselves.

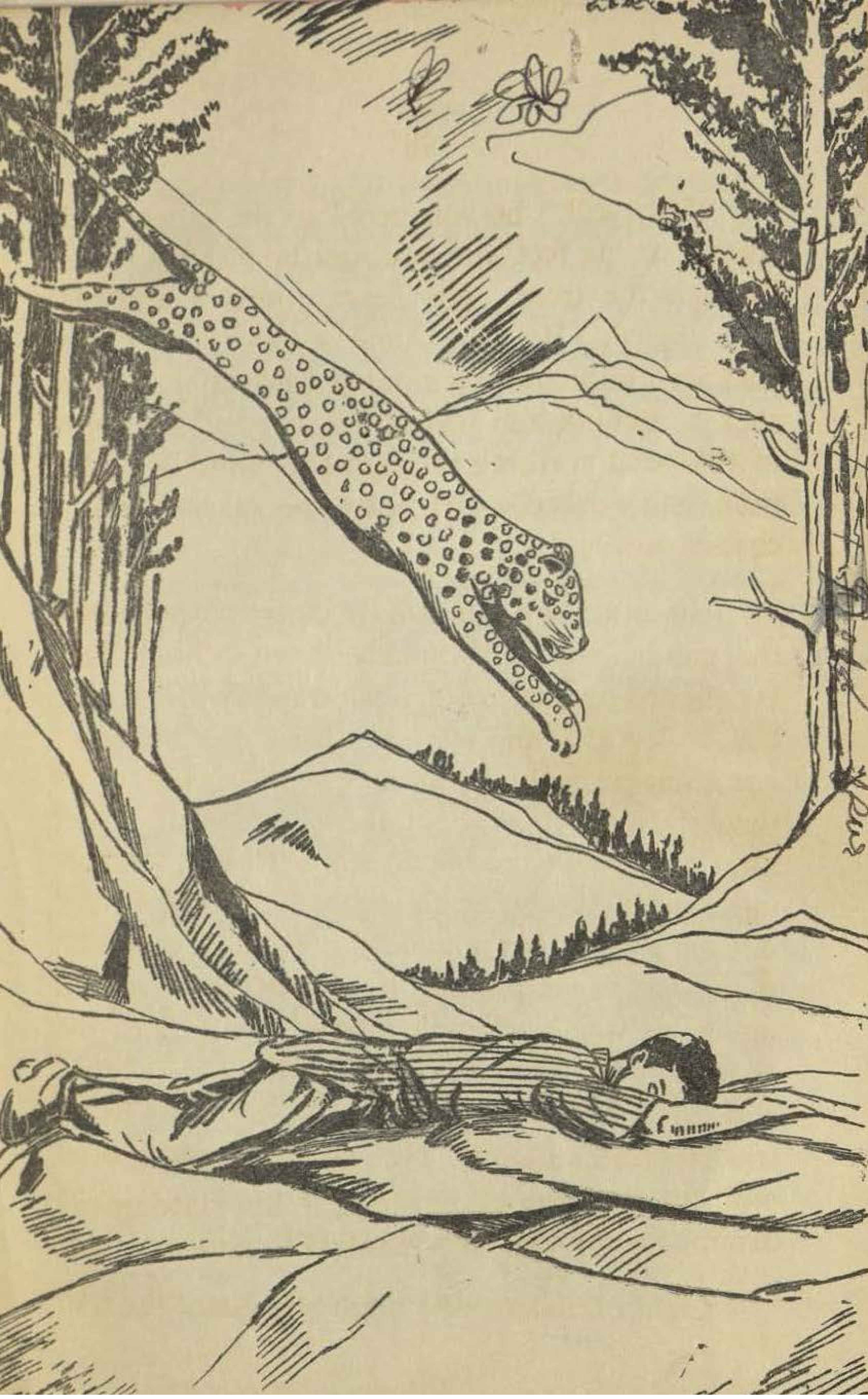
They all crouched down in the shadows, their frightened eyes peering into the darkness, their breath held in, their muscles tensed. Below them to the right, almost directly below the place where they heard the panther, they could hear a goat bleating. They listened intently for a repetition of that deep cough, or the sound of a breaking twig which might tell them what the panther was doing. About thirty feet away, they heard that gruff note again. The panther had heard them; it was coming nearer. Mahmud looked quickly at the dark shapes of the others huddled together against the trees. He knew it was no use their hiding; the panther would find them easily enough. There was only one hope. He had to create a diversion! He picked up a large stone and hurled it through the trees down below them. The panther growled but did not go off in pursuit.

Mahmud felt the sweat standing out cold on his forehead and dripping in his eyes. It was his fault they were in this mess; he had to get them out of it.

"Stay still," he whispered to the others and sprang to his feet and ran, crashing down rocks through the trees. His heart pounded and his face tingled. His feet found a way through the darkness, miraculously coming down safely on the rocks. Behind him he heard a roar and the noise of the beast crashing through the branches. His trick had worked! At least the others had a chance now.

His mind was amazingly clear; he imagined the panther stalking quickly down behind him. He slipped and slithered down rapidly for twenty feet, rolled over and was off again. But he could not compete with the animal in this country; in the dark it was hopeless. It was practically upon him. His ears were filled with a strange, screaming noise. Surely, he thought, the screams were not his own? He jumped out on to the branch of a tree beneath him; it swayed and cracked under his weight; he felt himself crashing to the ground. His hands reached out and burned and tore themselves on bark and branches as he tried to stop his fall. He succeeded for a brief moment in holding on to a branch and then dropped winded on to the ground.

Light blazed around him. He heard the roar



Shahid Ahsan.

of the panther and that strange noise of screaming and then there was a deafening crack like that of thunder. Something thudded down on to the ground a few feet from where he lay dazed and bewildered. He heard the pounding of feet running towards him and he noticed that the screaming had subsided to the plaintive bleat of a goat.

"Good shot, sir!" Mahmud heard a voice.

"Yes, but it was a close thing," came an answer. "Now let's have a look at you my lad."

Mahmud felt strong hands underneath his armpits and he was lifted into a sitting position.

"Nothing broken, I think," said the voice. "My God! It's Mahmud!"

Mahmud shook his head and his eyes began to focus properly. He screwed up his eyes and peered through the light given by a torch one of the men held, and recognized his uncle, Major Saeedullah Niazi. He smiled weakly because, with the return of his senses, he felt very sore.

"Goodness, my lad, you've had a narrow escape," said the Major. "How did you come to be here?"

Mahmud opened his mouth to answer, when there burst through the trees his four friends.

"Mahmud, are you all right?" cried Saeed and rushed and threw his arms around his cousin.

"He won't be if you all suffocate him," interrupted the Major as the four boys joyfully piled on Mahmud. "Saeed, what are you doing here, anyway?"

Saeed turned round and for the first time recognised his father. He threw himself into his father's arms. "Oh, Abba Jan," he cried, "thank God you were here. Otherwise Mahmud would have died. He saved our lives."

He quickly explained to his father how Mahmud had run through the forest to lead away the panther from them. Major Saeedullah bent down and lifted Mahmud to his feet.

"Mahmud," he said, "give me your hand. Thank you for what you have done. That was a very brave action."

Mahmud looked shyly at his uncle, "But thank you, sir, for you shot the panther and I owe my life to you. How did you come to be here?"

The major explained that they had chosen this small 'platform' of land to lie in wait for the panther. The screams Mahmud had heard were the terrified cries of the kid which they had tied up as bait. Then Mahmud had broken in upon them, swiftly followed by the panther. It was lucky for Mahmud that the Major was a crack-shot.

The Major then asked the boys how they came to be in the forest anyway. They quickly explained to him all that had happened. Major Saeedullah Niazi looked at the boys in astonishment. "My word," he said, "you've certainly been through a lot and you've done jolly well. But now we'd better go and collect those devils where you've left them." He turned to the two men with him. "Saleem, Akhtar, get that beast ready to move. We'll take it down to this house and we'll leave it there until tomorrow."

The boys watched in tired fascination as the two men, Saleem and Akhtar, fastened the panther's legs together and hung him from a pole. They examined his great fangs and claws and Mahmud could not help shivering at the thought of how he'd nearly become more closely acquainted with them. But now all danger was past and the real fear of only a few minutes before seemed remote and distant.

The men were soon ready and, carrying the beast hanging from the pole supported from their shoulders, they started off down the rocks in a slow but far from solemn procession. It did not take them long to reach the hut and the Major opened the padlock. Inside the three men still lay securely bound, although they had clearly been struggling to free themselves.

"Well," said the Major, "a pretty sight you look. You're going to pay for all you've done to these boys. We'll take you straight to the police now. Come on, get them to their feet."

"Abba Jan."

The Major turned his head as Saeed spoke to him. "Yes, son, what is it?"

"I don't think we're going tonight," said Saeed.

"Oh? Why not?" asked the Major.

"Well, look at Mahmud."

They all turned round and there on the charpie lay Mahmud, his body at last succumbing to its exhaustion, fast asleep.

The Major laughed. "I think you're right. We'd better spend the night here!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE FINAL ACT.

The following morning, they awoke early. Mahmud felt sore and bruised but his heart was light and happy. Ishtiaq busied himself around and produced some fruit and a cup of tea for breakfast. They all sat at the table and ate and chattered merrily while their three prisoners scowled at them.

"Give them a drink of tea, Ishtiaq," said the Major.

The boy gave them a drink. They still had their hands tied and they had to be fed like babies. When they had all finished they all went out into the forest.

The sun shone brightly and with an early morning freshness through the trees as the odd procession set off, the Major and his two companions, Saleem and Akhtar, carefully taking the trophies of the night's hunting, the panther and the three kidnappers. The Major held his gun

ready in case any of the men should try to escape. They climbed up slowly, while the boys jumped nimbly from rocks and pointed out to one another the platform where Major Saeedullah had lain in wait for the panther and Mahmud looked in horror at the tree from which he had fallen.

Suddenly the Major gave a cry. "Catch him!"

The boys turned round. Mazhar was not going to be taken that easily. He had broken from the procession and, trusting that the Major would not shoot, had gone racing off back the way they had come down the steep rocks. Saleem and Akhtar dropped their burden and set off in pursuit. The Major covered Scarface and Alamgir with the gun.

"Go on, you boys!" he cried. "You're faster than he is." But he need not have shouted. Mahmud, Saeed and Ishtiaq were already leaping down from rock to rock after their fleeing enemy. Mazhar, with amazing agility for a man of his build, especially since his hands were bound, dodged this way and that, down through the trees. But he was no match for the speed of the boys. Mahmud caught up close behind him, poised

himself for a moment on a rock, and hurled himself on to the running bulk of Mazhar.

Mazhar crashed to the ground with Mahmud on top of him and they rolled over and over down the slope until they came to rest against the tree. This time there was no fight left in Mazhar and he lay helpless against the tree trunk. The others came running down.

"Are you all right, Mahmud?" shouted Saeed.

Mahmud looked wanly up. He felt far from all right, although the worst of his fall had been cushioned by the immense body of Mazhar. "I think I'm all right," he said as the others helped him to his feet.

"There don't seem to be any broken bones," said Ishtiaq. "I'm beginning to think you must be made of rubber!"

They all laughed and turned round to see Mazhar slowly recovering.

He looked grimly up at them. "All right, you win," he said.

They helped him to his feet and, rather more

slowly now, clambered up to join the Major. He looked Mahmud up and down.

"Are you all right, my lad?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you," said Mahmud. "I'm getting a bit fed up with all these bruises, though."

At last they reached the top of the rocks and climbed out on to the pipeline. They rested for a moment and looked back across that breathtaking view and down in to the valley where they had so nearly met their death. In the bright light of the sun, with the colourful birds darting to and fro, the butterflies fluttering along just out of the reach of the happily chasing Munir, it seemed strange to think that they might so easily have not been there.

They walked cheerfully along to Dunga Gali and drank more tea while the Major tried to telephone to Murree to the police. However the line was still down and so they all piled aboard the Major's jeep and set off down the road. Already men wearing their bright red turbans were at work on the road and, as they approached the scene of the previous day's landslide, they heard the crisp "bang" of dynamite as the men blew away the worst of the blockage.

Even when the way was cleared, it was a perilous drive over the loose rocks and sand where the big rocks had fallen. The major made them all get out of the jeep while he drove it over the danger spot. As he churned his perilous path through the rubble, the others walked along behind and gazed down the mountainside at the remains of the lorry scattered among the rocks. Saeed pointed out the place where he had hidden out of view during all the excitement of the previous day.

"Come on!" called the Major. "Hop aboard!"

They climbed into the jeep and they started off for Murree at last. How different a journey it was from their outward trip! The boys sang and chattered most of the way, while this time it was the turn of the three kidnappers to sit looking wretchedly miserable. In no time at all, it seemed, they pulled up outside the police station.

Mahmud jumped down and went into the station. There behind the desk sat the police officer whom they had met the previous day.

"Good morning, sir," he said.

The officer looked up. "Good morning,"

he started. "Oh! it's you, is it? Where do you think you've been? I told you to come and report yesterday morning."

"Well," started Mahmud but had no chance to explain.

"And you're heading for trouble, young man," went on the officer. "While you were wasting my time, these two fellows were having their lorry stolen and were lucky to escape with their lives."

Mahmud turned round and there sitting on a bench were the lorry driver and his mate, their heads heavily bandaged. He smiled at them.

"Salaam aleikum," he said. "I'm glad you're all right."

"What do you mean?" snapped the officer. "Do you know these men?"

"Well, I've met them," said Mahmud, "and outside you'll find the men who stole their lorry."

The officer now jumped to his feet and the four of them rushed outside to the waiting jeep.

"Good morning, officer," said the Major. "I believe you'll be interested in this little jeep load."

"Good morning, sir," replied the officer. "This boy tells me you have the men responsible for the theft of a lorry yesterday and for the assault on these two men."

"We have," said the Major, "and they're responsible for a great deal more. It's due to this boy, here," and he pointed to Mahmud, "that I am able to hand over to you three of the most dangerous and despicable crooks that it's ever been my misfortune to meet. I suggest that we go inside and deposit this refuse."

CHAPTER XIV.

SEQUEL.

The proceedings in the police station took a long time while the boys unfolded their tale for the officer. Statements were taken and signed; 'phone calls were made to 'Pindi; Mazhar, Scarface and Alamgir were questioned and the boys consumed several bottles of 'coke'.

The tensest moment came when the officer began to question Mazhar about Ishtiaq and Tajassur. For a long time he refused to reveal anything but, when the officer pointed out that he had nothing to gain by keeping silent and, perhaps, some advantage to lose, he at last spoke.

"You'll never find their parents," he said. "It was seven years ago that we snatched them."

"Where was it?" pressed the officer.

"Lyallpur. They were wandering in the bazaar."

Mahmud turned and looked at the brothers. In their eyes showed a tired excitement as if they were afraid of hoping in case they were disappointed. He smiled at them and they smiled weakly back.

But in the meantime the officer was on the 'phone to Lyallpur, making enquires about their records for seven years earlier. The others sat round, straining to catch what he was saying. At last he put down the receiver.

"We'll just have to wait, I'm afraid," he said. "These things take time."

"Well, we'll go home," said the Major, "and have some lunch. Perhaps you'd be kind enough to let us know as soon as you hear something?"

They left the police station. The jeep had already gone and so they walked up to the Major's house among the other holiday makers returning from their morning's stroll. When they arrived they all had a welcome shower and, much refreshed, went to their meal. Several chickens had been killed in their honour and Mahmud's eyes nearly popped out at the sight of the heavily laden table.

They were just finishing their food when the bearer came in to say there was someone at the door and a moment later showed in a tall gentleman.

"Abba Jan!" cried Munir and ran from the table and threw himself into his father's arms.

When father and son had finished embracing, the Major, smiling, introduced himself and the boys. Once again their adventures were outlined. To Mahmud the much repeated story was almost losing its reality and, were it not for the bruises and cuts with which his body ached, he could scarcely believe he had been involved. But Munir's father was overwhelming in his gratitude and for a moment let go of his son to embrace Mahmud who now only wanted this heady embarrassment to come to an end. Relief came when the police officer arrived.

"Well, boys," he said to Ishtiaq and Tajassur, "you won't have much longer to wait. We've found your parents. They'll be here tonight."

For Ishtiaq and Tajassur there was an agony of expectation and when their parents arrived that evening, what a meeting was there! To Mahmud it seemed as if the whole world had gone

mad with happiness. The boys and their parents stayed the night with the Major, all of them re-united after so many troubles.

Wearied by all the excitement and their adventures, the boys, went to bed early, and Mahmud, saying his prayers for the first time in over two days, had a special prayer of thankfulness to offer. Then wearily to bed. Tomorrow the holiday would really begin.